Love is not Enough

Myshu

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Summary

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Description:

Nine Reunions. Zidane, Freya and Amarant, drinking and commiserating. Sometimes a friend's confidence is more valuable than a lover's. Sometimes we can't leave love lost well enough alone.

1. Reunions

A/N: Chalk another one up for me on the pretentious title war, spider.

Every time I finish a fic I tell myself, “This is the craziest thing I’ve ever written,” and somehow my subconscious takes that as a *personal challenge*.

So, here it is: another “craziest thing I’ve ever written.” Coming up, we’ve got some morbid comedy, some angst, and some almost-fluff. I think I’ll call it… fuzz. Yes, fuzz.

Hey there little sis,

What’s up? I hope the kids are alright. Tell them I miss them and I love ’em like my own.

How’re you? Did you keep any of those kittens, or didja give them all away like you said? I hope you held on to that one with the black patches, I think he liked you!

A lot’s happened since we last spoke. Rusty finally got the nerve to propose to Beatrix. It was

almost hilarious. Steiner was so red I thought he'd pass out before he finally spit it all out (I was eavesdropping, naughty me. Like the whole castle couldn't overhear that man anyway). I guess I'll never know what she sees in him, but the wedding's in three months. You're all invited, of course!

I'm still getting used to the married life, myself. I didn't realize living in the castle could be so crazy and routine at the same time. I don't know how Dagger ever deals with it. She's always real busy, but such is the life of a queen! That's what she tells me, anyway. I don't deal in all that political stuff. Beatrix and Rusty teamed up to try and enlist me in the Knights of Pluto. "Get some real use out of that lazy oaf," they said. After the sheer horror wore off I about laughed myself into a coma. Can you imagine me standing in rank in that stinky armour, watching Steiner hop up and down and yell? I just couldn't take the imagery.

Oh well, I'm sure I'll find my niche here somewhere.

I hope you'll come over for our little reunion this year. The kids sure would enjoy it! You need to get out of that damn house and socialize! Please consider it, for your big brother, okay?

P.S. Before I forget, I have a question about Genomes. A couple of months ago I started to notice some grey hairs in my comb, and I've been finding more ever since. Some in my tail, too. I thought it was maybe stress at first (hahaha), but now that I look my hair's seriously growing in solid grey, at the roots. It almost looks white.

I'm just a little disturbed—is this normal?

Dear Zidane (I learned that's how Gaians head informal letters, correct?),

The children and I are fine. We kept that kitten you mentioned, in fact. We're learning how to care for it together. I'll never understand the use in adopting such a pet, myself, but the children are very amused by the enterprise. Maybe that's the point?

Mr. 482 stopped two seasons ago. He was the last one. He lasted much longer than the others, Vivi excepted. The children are the only Black Mages left. When I feel they're ready, I'll discuss the children's origins with them and see how they feel about restoring others like themselves. I think it's what their father would have wanted.

The other Genomes are doing well. Adaptation to their new environment is a slow process, but they are every day resembling you silly, irrational Gaians a little more.

I wish you the best in settling in your new home, yourself. Don't let those Alexandrians be a trouble to you. They're rather unpredictable, but then again so are you. I'll consider visiting for that reunion, though I don't feel very comfortable around your friends. Maybe I'll stay just for a short while. I hope you'll come over and visit us all sometime soon, yourself.

P.S. Yes, it's normal at your age. There are two other Genomes here with grey hair. Did you think Kuja always looked that way? He once had yellow-blonde hair, too.

Dear Mikoto (Yep),

Sorry to hear about Mr. 482—was he the one with that onion patch? Or was that Mr. 352? Sorry if I got the numbers mixed up, I'm usually good about those things.

I think it's a good idea to let the kids decide, too. I also think you could learn more from us "silly Gaians" than you realize! And my friends don't bite! Well, except Quina (just kidding).

The reunion is in five weeks, I really hope you'll show. Everyone would like to see you and the kids again. What did you guys name that kitten?

P.S. Really? It's hard to picture Kuja like that, somehow. And I don't remember seeing anyone with white hair in Bran Bal…

Dear Zidane (Good to know),

Mr. 352 had the onion patch. Mr. 482 managed our potion shop. He made that juice you liked so much.

You wouldn't have seen anyone with white hair at Bran Bal because once first-gens reached that age Garland took them into Pandemonium, to either become his close servants or be decommissioned.

I think I will come to the reunion after all. We need to talk about this in person.

P.S. The kitten's name is Crackers. Bi's idea. I think he's a little too fond of food; he's overweight.

Mikoto,

Great! I'll see you soon.

"First-gens"? 'Close servants'? "Decommissioned"? I don't like the vibe I'm getting from your last letter. Should I be worried? I guess we'll talk more when you get here.

P.S. Haha, sounds like something Quina would name a cat. If s/he didn't decide to cook and eat it first.

The reunion was something tacked-on to an already uplifting occasion: Her Majesty Queen Garnet Til Alexandros XVII's birthday—not to be confused with her seventeenth birthday (which took place before the reunions), but nevertheless a mouthful that didn't fit very well on the banners festooned over Alexandria Square every year. A simple, "Happy Birthday, Your Majesty" tended to suffice.

As per custom, a grand feast was prepared by the kingdom's top gourmand, a Qu that could be known for more famous endeavors than cooking a pot of soup so spicy it gave an ambassador from Daguerreo a stroke, but the best gossip is the most gruesome. Dignitaries from all corners of the Mist Continent (and beyond) were invited to the party that could not contain itself in the ballrooms (spacious though they might be) of Alexandria castle. The festivities spilled out the courtyards, across the moat and into the streets for every man and woman, common or better-wrought, to indulge in toasts and revelries on the queen's behalf.

The birthday was an excuse, really; behind every raised glass was the addendum, spoken or not, "To the saviors of the world." Garnet's turning of age was a special marker on the calendar for a time nobody who'd sifted through the rubble of their homes or buried someone dear in the ashen wake of an eidolon would quickly forget. It was a world war, Gaia's war—not the first, unbeknown to most, but certainly the most profound in the people's memory. It was Garnet's sixteenth birthday that initiated those planet-shaping events, first bitter and then, after a lost two years, sweet as a fairy tale.

That was the first reunion. She was eighteen and lonely as a caged songbird. The now-famous Tantalus theater troupe was performing for her, just like they did the last time, just the same play as last time, to forge some kind of tradition out of the nostalgia. He made a dramatic entrance, as he's always wont to do, and she rushed through the crowd and into his waiting arms. The throng cheered, happy ending. Everybody knows the story.

There was a big dinner to follow the show, which Quina graciously catered sans-frogs. The entire gang was there—the "eight heroes," people already began to say—and there was elated, frantic chatter until the sleepy hours.

Eiko clung to her adoptive parents, Regent Cid and his wife Hilda, like a pair of gaudy rings she had to flash at every opportunity. Neither seemed overly perturbed with the arrangement; Cid would only throw his head back and laugh at the child's every precocious outburst.

Freya appeared in full cut-&-armor, as if the call to Alexandria were one to the battlefront. Her polearm was checked at the front gates, where a pair of confounding Pluto Knights had to convince the Dragon Knight to lay down her weapon in the interest of castle security. It ultimately took many

more than two of them.
Amarant showed up in his typical, nonchalant style, and proceeded to sulk in the corner for most of the festivities. Nobody wanted to hear what he muttered behind everyone's backs.
Steiner shrieked, stomped and fussed over his queen and then his new girlfriend, the distressingly gorgeous and levelheaded warrior Beatrix. The captain was generally an old maid, not the least towards Zidane, who suffered a blasting reprisal for his bravado that left Her Majesty "worried sick for ages." The kitchen staff, the librarians and the Knights of Pluto collaborated for the first time in history with their petition for Captain Steiner to kindly "shut the hell up." Garnet's laughter was the first voice to break the subsequent, rage-filled silence, and the entire hall followed suit.

Garnet—or Dagger, depending on the company—was glowing and shiny with tears of joy, for a change. At the head of the banquet table, her hand in Zidane's, she was the picture of the little-girl-fantasy come true. Everything felt like a bona fide "happily ever after."

The only damper on the party was the absence of one of the group's dearest comrades, Vivi. The child-mage had "stopped," as the euphemism went,

several months beforehand. His six children attended in his spirit, but everybody knew in their hearts that, despite the eerie resemblance, it wasn't the same.

The Tantalus troupe excused themselves early for the bawdy parties in town, and the little Vivi spawns retired shortly after. Garnet's closest friends were afforded guest rooms throughout the castle to stay the night in. Freya remembered her quarters that first reunion being not-quite-whole, furnished merely with a cot, two down pillows, a dusty floor and apologies on behalf of the castle reconstruction crew.

Every birthday thereafter became a holiday, and like every holiday, some were more momentous than others, though not one ever matched the first. It just wouldn't do.

In that vein, the second reunion was anticlimactic. Amarant didn't even show up, voting to be apathetic on his own time. His devil-may-care attitude towards the reunions became the root of another tradition: the "Will Amarant Show Up This Year?" betting pool. Treno's "number one bandit" proved to be a sporadic, fleeting presence, which kept the game interesting birthday after birthday.

On a perverse level, Freya always missed him, and not just because she lost twenty gil each time he didn't show. It was some kind of brusque flattery that most of Amarant's subversive asides were reserved for her ears only—with the "rat" pejorative tacked on, of course. She'd give him something nimble and cutting in return, and he'd either bat the curt ball back into her court or grunt resignation and slouch back into his post. Without the cynical bounty-hunter at the table, dinner conversation was a little less entertaining.

Amarant wasn't around for the third reunion either, but there were bigger fish to fry that round. Dagger and Zidane predictably got married on the queen's twentieth birthday, after a predictable engagement and complete with predictable pomp and ceremony.

The queen's court even successfully predicted the objections that arose from Alexandrian nobility over a common thief marrying into the royal house. However, since the couple had the endorsement of Lord Steiner, Lady Beatrix and the regent of Lindblum, there wasn't much room left for protest. Zidane became Garnet's prince consort by marriage, and that was that.

If one asked Garnet, the wedding was a blissful blur, too brief and too sweet and yet too long and too loud—a moment she had to chase to keep up with. It was the proposal, that private connection between her and her love and the stars, that hung in perfect clarity in her heart, like a glass ornament.

She'd remember that night on a castle parapet being a little too chilly—she thought that was why Zidane was trembling, at first—and then he was on his knees and pleading like she'd never heard him before—quiet and desperate and needy like hope. He said many things that did not make sense, but she knew her long-lost pendant when it was gently pressed into her palm (apparently there was tremendous trouble retrieving it, the King House of Treno be damned if it ever heard about it), and after a breathless wait he was at the point.

"Dagger, let me be your eidolon. If you call me, I will come. Always. Even if I'm gone… even if I say goodbye… I'll never leave your side. You won't ever be alone. Never ever. All you have to do is call me, like you do your other eidolons. And, if I'm yours, no one else can—no one else can use me—I can't hurt anyone anymore I don't want to just, just… just please…"

He bowed his head. She thought she saw tears hiding in his hair and on the bricks at his feet, and in the sky.

"…Please be my summoner."

She said yes.

As if to provide bonus gossip, Freya and Fratley brought their newborn twins, Adele and Brit, to the wedding reception. The Burmecian couple were wed that past autumn at the chapel in Gizamaluke's Grotto. It was a beautiful ceremony, even though the moogles started throwing kupo nut husks once they ran out of rice, accidentally pelting Prince Puck in the eye. The ensuing outburst allegedly profaned the last six kings of Burmecia, and the priest reprimanded His Highness before the entire wedding party, saying all were lucky that "his late Master Gizamaluke did not rise from his eternal slumber and bite the foul mouth clean off" the vulgar prince. Puck's rejoinder (which was shortly published in the *Treno Herald*) was that by the time "Mister (censored) Zombie Gizamaluke" was finished with the "(censored) moogles" he'd be well out of harm's way.

Puck wasn't invited to Garnet and Zidane's wedding. He showed up anyway.

For the fourth reunion, Zidane performed for the last time alongside his Tantalus brothers in a play for Alexandria's queen. For following birthdays he'd spend the show by his wife's side, in the royal booth.

Had Amarant not made a bet-shattering appearance, the centers of attention that gathering would've been the newlyweds Steiner and Beatrix, Alexandria's Captain of the Pluto Knights and General, respectively. The happy fit had been made official two months prior, and Regent Cid called the pairing "another foregone conclusion"—in good humor, of course.

Amarant was monopolizing the bad humor, anyway. "Everyone getting married right and left… it's disgusting," he grunted to any who dared ask his opinion. Eiko, eleven years old and at her wit's end with his remarks, hotly asked why he didn't go get married and stop being bitter, and he stared frostily at her until she became uncomfortable and bothered someone else.

The only sight rarer than Amarant was Mikoto, who had finally ventured to Alexandria at her brother's cajoling. Zidane made a slight spectacle of her arrival, to her red-cheeked embarrassment (and

confusion: “Why is that cake aflame?”). The siblings chatted privately for a while before Zidane retired early, to the group’s bemusement (and more of Mikoto’s confusion: “What is a rain check?”)

Freya lost another twenty gil the fifth reunion, but won it back the sixth. By then Beatrix had borne a son whom was christened (to unbearable irony) Alexander. (Zidane’s official comment was that “corny is as corny does.” You would never get Steiner to admit that he stayed up late that night trying to interpret it, until Beatrix insisted he give up for sanity’s sake.)

Watching Freya and Fratley’s twins play with the infant inspired Amarant’s usual complaint, only with “babies” muttered in place of “married.” Freya tried to tell him to stow it.

“‘Brat’ has ‘rat’ in it for a reason, you know.”

“Not one more word, Coral, or you’ll be short one of those precious dreds.”

Hi Mikoto,

I’m glad you showed up at the reunion after all. Next time you should bring the kids along! I’m sorry

if I embarrassed you, but it was all in good fun, I hope you know. I'm also sorry about the way I reacted to, well… you know. I wasn't a very good host, running off to bed like that.

I'm still coping with the news, to be honest. I can't even write it out—my hand's shaking. I usually don't lose my nerve like this, just so you know. But I don't mean you should feel sorry for telling me. I'm really glad you did. I just wish there was something I could do.

I haven't decided yet how I'm gonna tell the others. I haven't even decided if I will. Worst case, they find out the hard way, right? I don't think letting them know sooner is going to do anybody any good, especially Dagger. Do you know what I mean? I just want to enjoy whatever time we have left together.

You've got to live life to the fullest, because every minute counts, you know? Vivi was right. It's amazing how wise he was.

I'll make a point to come back to the village and see everyone sometime.

P.S. Pet Crackers for me.

2. Theatrics

"So, Alexandria."
'Yes, time for that little get-together again. I can't wait to see everyone again.'
"I know you can't. It's in a week, is it not? You know, I once went to—"
"—Alexandria, many years ago."
"Ah. Ehem, that's right."

"So…"
"…So."
"Nice weather today, isn't it?"
'It's raining. It's always raining.'
"Well, erm, yes, but it's pleasant today. More than usual, I mean. The rain is softer, that is."

"Is something wrong?"
'Fratley, you, I mean… never mind.'
"Are you sure? You sound terse. Are you annoyed with me? Please tell me what is the matter. I can't do anything about it if you don't."
"Why does it feel like I'm never getting anywhere with you?"
'Pardon?'
"We have the same conversations, over and over. Is

there nothing else to you? Don't you have anything else to say?"
"Whatever are you talking about?"
'Nothing! Nothing. Never mind. I'm just in a sour mood today. I woke up with a headache.'
"Oh… Would you like me to fetch some herbal tea for that?"
"No, thanks."
"Are you sure? I can be back in ten minutes. It's nothing at—"
'I don't want any *bloody* tea.'
"…Very well."
"Fratley, you're never going to remember our past, are you?"
'So, that's what this is about.'
"Nevermind, forget I mentioned it."
"No, I mind. Freya, I'm trying, you know I am!"
'It doesn't matter! It's not working!…That's not even what's the matter. Sometimes I don't think we are working.'
"Don't speak like that. I love you—"
"You say that all the time, but do you *remember* loving me? I can't remember if I loved you either, back then. I only remember missing you. I remember my heart breaking when you left. You walked right out of the palace and didn't even look back."

‘What do you want me to say? I can’t remember! How can I account for what I cannot recall?’
“You remembered His late Highness, and the Dragon Knights, and even Alexandria, but I do not cross your old mind! It is as if I did not exist before!”
“Freya, I love you *now*. We have two beautiful children that we made together, with our love! Isn’t that what’s most important?”

“Freya, don’t you love me?”

“Freya…”
‘Of course I do. Please forgive me those things I said. I didn’t mean to be hurtful.’
“It’s… all right.”

“So…”
‘So.’
“Lovely weather today, isn’t it?”
“You already said that.”
“…I’m going to check on the children. And bring you some tea.”
“Yes, do.”

The seventh reunion marked Amarant’s most memorable visit, though only for those who watched

closely from backstage.

After the show and dinner, Garnet's special guests piled into the west drawing room for tea and a quiet evening, or an evening as quiet as two four-year-olds and a baby didn't want it to be. Quina stayed behind in the banquet hall to "clear the table," though that could arguably mean anything from washing the dishes to using the tablecloth as a napkin.

Cid, Fratley, Freya and Beatrix took turns playing cards around a low oaken table while Hilda hovered over their shoulders like a buzzard, offering monosyllabic commentary that shortly drove the players to the edge of annoyance.
Steiner was dressed for duty, as always ("Castle security is serious business!") He paced along the bookshelves on the far wall, trying to appear vigilant while making a racket of it (Zidane once cracked that a fiend wouldn't dare approach with Sir Rusty the Noisy on watch.) Amarant lurked in the doorway, as if he had someplace to be and was either waiting on someone or didn't care to get there. Zidane sat to himself in an armchair facing the fireplace, watching the flame-licked logs in a half-lidded trance.

Freya had met Zidane long before the others (except her dashing husband, of course). Back then, he was an impetuous thirteen-year-old with no ear for authority higher than his own and no calling any less or greater than the wind. He was on some soul-searching quest for his birthplace, and she on a quest for unfulfilled love lost, not yet knowing if ignorance truly was bliss. It was a tad ironic that they didn't find what they were looking for until their second journey together, after each had given up the hunt.

Those days felt far away and alien when she looked at Zidane now. It was foolhardy, the Dragon Knight knew, to expect people to never change, but since their first encounter a decade ago, he'd become the victim of one too many subtle alterations.

His appearance was the most obvious difference. It was nothing to do with his round, boyish features, which hadn't matured one bit (his Tantalus "brothers" made fair game of that observation with many terrible jokes), but since the young man left his teenage years behind, his hair and fur rapidly turned from sunny blonde to slate, and then finally to powder-snow, rendering a haunting

transfiguration. Eiko had asked, “Is your hair turning white?” every year until it stopped being a question.

When Garnet demanded her husband dress like a “real noble” for royal functions, he’d wear fine silks and his hair down in soft ivory blades, and it would occur to his friends that he looked just like…
Well, nobody ever had the heart to say it. Besides, for better or for worse, that’s where the resemblance ended.

Zidane was still friendly, still impetuous and ever heedless of the higher word (unless it came from Garnet, of course), but in each way subdued. There was once a flair to his pace and gestures that had turned languid, and too often during her visits Freya would find him in a corner, chin propped in his hand and a lost smirk on his lips, staring into nowhere. Only when someone called his attention would a quick, bright spark ignite in his eyes, bringing his old self to light.

“Babies are sooo cute.”

Eiko sat on the sofa with Dagger, who coddled the dozing Alexander. Cid and Hilda’s adopted daughter was eager to pry what she called “girl talk” from the queen.

Dagger smiled faintly, glancing to Eiko and then back to the child. “Yes, they are. If Beatrix thinks it’s okay, would you like to hold him?”

“Oh, please?” Eiko cast a pleading look towards the mother, who tipped a nod her way before laying down her next card. “Sure. Be careful. Let Garnet show you how to hold him. And that takes your zuu, Cid.”

Eiko sidled up to Garnet to accept the swaddled bundle, taking care to mimic the queen’s posture. The father paused to watch, looking like a ruffled tin can, and then resumed his rounds once Alexander was comfortable again.

Cid took the turn in stride. “My poor zuu. I’ll never see it again. Oh wait, yes I will. My feather circle takes zuu and your cactuar, my dear Beatrix.”

“Darling,” Hilda interjected, “You should’ve saved your feather circle for the next turn. Now you don’t have anything to protect that corner pocket.”

Cid’s mustache ticked and Adele and Brit, spying on the game at ground-level from each side of the table, broke out in snickers. “Quiet, woman! Can’t you go over there and give away what’s in *her* hand?”

“I’m just trying to help,” Hilda responded huffily.

Freya smirked with amusement. “Yes, Lady Hilda is helping Beatrix out plenty.”

“Aww, his fingers are so tiny,” Eiko cooed as she handled the baby. Her head snapped up with a peaking thought. “Hey Dagger, why don’t you and Zidane have any kids yet?”

Beatrix returned the card she was about to draw to her hand and shuffled it around a bit, stalling the game; Steiner shuffled in place like a stack of irritated garbage cans; Amarant pushed himself off the doorframe and stood… as upright as he could, ready for *something*; Fratley sipped his tea, pretending not to notice anything amiss, and his kids made their curiosity as obvious as possible, turning wide eyes around the quiet room before fixing them to the source of the hush.

Freya couldn’t say she didn’t want to know; she’d wondered that very thing since Steiner and Beatrix’s wedding, but it felt taboo to bring it up, since no one else would. Eiko just had impeccable talent for asking what was on everyone else’s mind.

Garnet reached to the side table, picked up her cup and cleared her throat, only to douse it with tea

the next instant. She swallowed quickly, spun a glance around the room, caught all the intently watching faces, and began, “Well…”

“That’s not a polite thing to—” Lady Hilda tried to admonish Eiko.

“We can’t,” loudly interrupted the fireplace, it seemed. Eyeballs turned magnetically to the far-off figure in the chair, who leaned over the armrest to return the looks. Zidane opened his mouth again, about to continue, but then his brow furrowed when he spotted the Burmecian twins on the floor. He instead turned attention to them, as if to stifle Eiko’s impending, “Why?”

“Hey kids, wanna hear a story?”

“Oh yay!” Brit bounced to his feet, ever the budding Dragon Knight, and his sister followed him to the hearth with a little more grace. Amarant huffed and leaned back into the door, no longer interested.

“Once upon a time,” Zidane began.
“All the stories start like that. It’s corny,” Brit sniffed, his tiny whiskers buzzing around his muzzle.

Adele punched him in the arm. “It’s rude to interrupt.”

Zidane picked up his breath where it left off. “Your sister’s right. Now, once upon a time, there was a man. His name was…” He cast a sly glance to the infant in Eiko’s arms. “…Alex.”

And so, Freya sighed inwardly, she wouldn’t know the truth for another year. It seemed unfair, the why not. Garnet had a maternal touch with Alexander as well as Freya’s children, and kids just loved Zidane. She couldn’t imagine those two not wanting a family of their own, so the cause had to be something unfortunate.

Zidane regaled his guests with a fantastic tale, something dressed up with swift gestures and wild impersonations. The story was rife with things most in the room couldn’t claim to in their wildest dreams (which was something, considering they’d once traversed a world consisting entirely of memories), and the kids ate it up like candy, eager and believing. Garnet would remark that her husband had the craziest imagination of them all, though with an anxious waver in her voice, one that questioned the truth. Freya could relate to it; her old friend’s stories smelled of familiar, yet impossible things, and

Zidane liked to mix up the names, as if to cover his tracks. It was noteworthy that all conversation yielded to overhear what everyone thought the wily storyteller was really talking about.

Alex scaled mountaintops, hopped spaceships, slew giant trees, spoke with ghosts and rescued many damsels before Alexander finally wailed something, ushering story-time to an end. Cards were put away, the twins offered sleepy protests about not being tired and parents shuffled everyone into their quarters. In this fashion the party disbanded, a little early but late enough.

"Are the children asleep?"
'Yes, they're sound asleep. It's been a long day for them.'
"It certainly has."

"What's wrong, my dear?"
"…Nothing."
"Oh. I'm just saying, nothing has made you very quiet. You sure there isn't something you want to talk about?"
'No, I'm fine. It's… it's nothing. I must be tired as well. Let's just sleep.'

“Very well. Goodnight, Freya. I love you.”
“…I love you too.”

It was a couple of hours later when Freya got up again. She had been festering restlessly in the bed she was sharing with Fratley until she’d had enough and decided that if she wasn’t going to fall asleep, she’d at least be up and about.

She was careful enough; her husband didn’t stir one snore. By the time she’d slipped out of the covers, off the feather tick (the room was luxuriously furnished, for a change), into a silk robe (yes, definitely luxurious) and through the door to the outside hall, it seemed like the entire castle was asleep.…Except for her, she thought with a sour twinge.

She stuck her snout into the crack of the next door, checking on Adele and Brit: both were still with sleep as well. Glancing across the way, her eyes met a guard who nodded at her. Freya straightened her robe and moved on.

For lost minutes she ambled by gilded candelabra and through checkered galleries, soaking in the plush carpet between her toes. She couldn’t pin

down what was troubling her; the past, the future and a man named Alex hummed between her ears. Nostalgia washed her down grand steps and into the back passages, parts of the castle built fresh over the nethers so that it reeked of a plush, poorly-lit, gold-leafed dungeon. Before long, she had found a reclusive drawing room. Warm light spilled through its threshold, just ahead of voices.

Before Freya knew what she was doing, she was standing outside the open door, eavesdropping.

“You came here *after all this time* just to challenge me?”

Zidane?

“You still owe me a rematch. I didn’t forget.”

And Amarant. Given what she’d heard already, she wasn’t very surprised, but still intrigued.

“That’s all our friendship means to you?”

“Don’t try to confuse me. This is about being strong.”

Freya recalled a far-away exchange with Amarant over motives. *“I need to understand him… He doesn’t flaunt his power. He only cares about being with his friends…”*

“Me being strong or you being strong?”

Zidane had a knack for turning words around, making arguments look foolish or fools look argumentative—it was the best he could do to look like neither. It supposedly made him an excellent con-artist on top of an actor, although Freya couldn’t vouch for that. The most impressive performance she’d watched by Tantalus counted on a royal interruption for its climax.

“You don’t understand…”

Hardly anyone—no, nobody understood Amarant. The fleeting moments Freya thought she was connected to him, right in the heat of battle, at the sleepy night-watch or on a cool street corner, were always brushed off with a steady scowl or flat grunt. “Later, rat.”
She didn’t know why a part of her pursued knowing him, the unknowable, but it must have been for the same reason Amarant tried so hard to understand Zidane. Freya wondered if *that* was the only thing they’d ever have in common.

“You’re not exactly doing a good job of explaining it to me.”

“I’m challenging you because I *am* your friend.” It was snarled, resentful persuasion. She could picture Amarant spitting it out through gritted teeth.

“…Huh.” A droll note.

“What?” Annoyed, impatient.

“You’re pretty unbelievable, you know that?”

“Are you chickening out?”

“I’m afraid I have to. I can’t fight you here.”

“We’ll take it outside, then.” Always straightforward Amarant.

“…No.”

“No?”

No?

“That’s right. I don’t want to fight you, Amarant. If that’s all you came for, you can go home.” Morose, a strange tone coming from Zidane.

“You are chickening out, then.”

Freya would never understand Amarant’s black-and-white painting of the world, either.

“If that’s what you want to call it.”

“Hrmph. Sitting in this castle has turned you soft.”

“Probably. In case you didn’t notice, I’m in no shape to fight anymore. If all you wanted is to prove who’s stronger, I’ll give that title to you. If you still wanna kick my ass, for whatever other reasons you have, that’s fine, too. Just make it quick; I’m going to bed soon.” Dismissive, defeated: more tones that didn’t suit him.

“Forget it.…Somehow, this wasn’t as satisfying as I’d hoped.”

“Sorry to disappoint you. Take comfort with this, then: You’ll never be the strongest.”

“What?” Defensive—or offended—or confused, or all of the above. Amarant was a master of deadpan, even with questions.

“No matter how tough, or smart, or brave you are, there’s always someone out there who’s stronger, smarter or better than you. That’s the trouble with being the best, really: you’ll always be asked to prove it, and one day you’re not going to be able to live up to your reputation.” A heady pause. “Then what’re you going to do, Amarant?”

“Is that a threat?”

“No… just some friendly advice.” Sincerity, the kind spoken from experience.

“I don’t need advice from has-been bookworms like you. You still don’t understand.”

“I guess not.” Acquiescing, just like that.

“Hrmph. No wonder you can’t knock up your wife—you’re too much of a wimp.”

Freya thought she caught a humbled “ouch” from the injured party, but her next concern was bumping into Amarant, who tilted back a nose at the sight of her. She didn’t get three, sweeping blinks before he shuffled past, caring less for the interruption. “Later, rat.”

In the wake of her shame at being caught on the spy, she was hit again with the notion that now Zidane, too, was aware she was there. Since it seemed too late and silly now to walk away and pretend she hadn’t even got out of bed, she adjusted her robe and stepped clean into the room.

The setting was cozy enough on the eyes. Shelves of reading material hugged the close walls, exuding the authentic, soporific feel of a library. For a drawing room, it didn’t have much in windows; one hid like a turtle between tall, wooden, book-laden

shoulders. A quaint hearth offered a warm focal-point. A sofa and cushioned chair straddled a tea table and its litter: a heavy stack of volumes, a bottle of red wine, some glasses to accommodate it and a tipsy stack of playing cards.

Zidane was comfortably nestled in the overstuffed chair, so much that Freya surmised he hadn't left it for a while, not even for (or especially not for) his last visitor. She paced nearer, approaching his side, taking sudden wide-eyed note of his attire. Since she'd gone to bed he had changed into a baggy robe-thing that, settled in the chair's maw like so, looked readier to devour than dress him. He resembled a bean cushion that someone had already sat in, and if not for his bare head, hands, feet and tail poking rather adorably out of the mess she couldn't have told which limb went which way.

But then, Freya was more transfixed by the emptied wine glass in his hand, the thick, dust-colored tome folded across his lap and the plain, thin pair of reading glasses perched on his button nose. When he peered sideways at her, she faltered, wondering if the apparition were real—wondering whether she didn't step into a bubble of alternate reality, and that if she stepped back out and walked through the door again she'd be met with a different

scene, one with Zidane the bouncing, cock-grinned bandit she'd always known rather than this inert, scholarly lump in the chair.

Then she realised that they'd been staring at each other for about a minute and neither of them had *said anything yet*.

"I, I didn't mean to overhear," the Burmecian floundered, motioning towards the door in awkward circles. "I'm sorry. I'll go."

At her voice, the Genome's idle composure broke and he sat up straight, fumbling with the glass in his hand. "Oh no, it's okay," he said quickly, "Please, you don't have to go. Oh, um…" He blinked dazedly at the bottle and glasses on the table before remembering what they were for. "Would you like a drink? I don't have any tea, I know you like that, but, uh… some wine? We can sit and chat for a while, if you like."

"I…" It would have been too easy to dismiss herself, but something earnestly pleading about his suggestion compelled her to stay. "Thank you. That would be lovely."

He grinned faintly, nervously even (she wondered if he was still embarrassed over what she'd

overheard), and reached to the table to pour her a glass. The book he'd been cradling clattered to the floor, and Zidane cursed softly as he stooped to retrieve it.

Freya moved towards the sofa, but before she could sit down she had to give Zidane's outfit another appraisal. It wasn't quite right on him, and her mind was toiling over why (besides the obvious, that it was too large.)
She scrutinized the tucked-down hood, the closed flares at the sleeves, the purposeful tail-slit and the spread of carrion worm thread, which was known for its comfort, light weight and resilience, but requires such hand-knitted care to assemble that it's only seen on the backs of Cleyrans, who had honed the craft to tedious perfection. If she didn't know any better (and maybe she didn't), it could only be for—no…

"Are you wearing a cleric's habit?" had to be the first thing out of her mouth, of everything.

It wasn't quite. It was cut in the style of the old famous Gizamaluke Monks, who wore dirt-brown habits fastened with ropes, looking the part of a vow of poverty. Zidane's was something a little classier,

tied snugly at his waist with a band of silk the same deep violet as the rest of the costume.

He started, glanced up at her and froze, half bent over the edge of his chair and gravity slowing tugging a book out of his suddenly stiff fingers. Before Freya could wonder exactly what was the matter, “It’s more than what you’re wearing,” worked numbly out of his mouth.

“What?” What did *her* robe have to do with —‘Oh, gods!’ she shrieked and whirled around, struggling to push her exposed breasts back into the ivory-silk folds of her garment. Once her bearings (and boobs) were back where they belonged, she spun around again to face him, probing for his reaction. Zidane acknowledged the sighting with a raised brow and a haughty, restrained grin, as if it were some kind of victory over her but he was still trying to be polite about it. Seeing straight through him, she narrowed her eyes and muttered in high dudgeon, “Wipe that smirk off your face.”

“Well, that’s not something a man gets to see every day around here,” he chuckled, at last prepared her glass of wine and pushed it to her side of the table.

“That’s *enough*,” Freya pouted, mightily embarrassed.

Strangely enough, that incident broke the ice, and all of a sudden both fell into more relaxed discourse. Freya sat down, daintily crossed her legs and sipped her drink, all at once the dignified lady again.

“I got it from the Daguerrean ambassador,” Zidane belatedly answered.

“Pardon?” It came a little too late for Freya to remember what he was answering.

“These clothes. She was a refugee from Cleyra, you remember?”
Of course you do. Catching the bitter twinge in the Burmecian’s countenance, Zidane cleared his throat and switched tracks. “She was a real sweetheart. We chatted for hours. We got talking about how all these rich people clothes aren’t very comfortable for demis—where do I put my tail, right? She said she had just the thing for me, and mailed me this as a gift.”

“Oh. That was very nice of her.”

“Yeah.”

“I must admit, I was taken aback to see you wearing it. I’m used to seeing it on Burmecians.” She let a low giggle slip. “You actually look a little silly. I think it’s far too big for you.”

He plucked at a voluminous pant leg, just then paying attention to its superfluous size. “Haha, you think so? That’s okay, I really like it. It feels so comfy and soft. Life is short, might as well be comfortable, right?”

Freya couldn’t argue with that. Instead, they began to babble on a number of things: tails, fleas and fur care, bad actors, good knights, poor sports and fine drink—not the least the latter, which they slurped down between rounds of talk.

Eventually (she couldn’t later remember how he came to mind, only that he did), she mused out loud, “Amarant doesn’t seem to have changed at all.”

From mid-swallow Zidane coughed up a blushing laugh. “Eheh. It’s okay. Fighting is the only way he knows how to express himself. I was flattered, actually.”

“Flattered?”

“I mean, it’s nice to know he’s still thinking of me, heh.”

One of Freya's long ears dipped as she considered his strange optimism. "What are you doing up here so late, anyway?"

He took a moment to remember himself, his idle hand fingering the rim of his eyeglasses. "Oh. Just reading."

"Reading what, if I might ask?"

"Hey, what are *you* doing up here so late?"

"I couldn't sleep, is all." Freya shrugged to take the edge off her reply.

"'Misery loves company,' then." Getting comfortable with the fact that he wasn't going to be reading anymore, he took off the spectacles and folded them on top of the book, setting both onto the table.

She stared at the reading glasses, unable to help but be bemused by the big picture again. "You're such a different person from the kid I met. It's like I don't know you anymore." Freya smiled, as if it were a joke she didn't find funny.

"It's okay," Zidane waved the remark off, "I don't know myself anymore either."

They shared a mirthless chortle. Zidane then polished off his drink in a big gulp and fell onto one elbow with a grumbling sigh.

Freya's keen eyes didn't fail to notice another empty wine bottle tucked behind the back leg of his chair, though she couldn't tell if her friend was feeling down, feeling smashed or both. She did know that he became reclusive when depressed and touchy when inebriated… Freya would never forget the bewildered scowl Amarant wore around midnight of the first reunion, when she bumped into him on the way into a rowdy Alexandrian tavern. Zidane was clinging to the blue brute's arm and pointing at passers-by with his free hand, caroling high and loud, "I luv you and you and you and YOU too man, totally forever. Best. Party. Eeeever."

At any rate, Freya knew both conditions were a volatile mix. She had no idea what he'd try to do in such a state.

"God, I'm depressed," he slurred under his breath.

She had a feeling she was about to find out. "Why?"

Zidane blinked emptily. "…I don't know." Too abruptly, his mien sharpened with a grin. He stood up, rounded the table and licked his lips dangerously, like a prowling lion. "I have an ideeaaa," he sang.

"What?" she wondered, naturally wary.

"Take off your robe and lie down on your belly," he demanded, as if he were telling her to go brush her teeth or finish her vegetables.

"Good gods! Why should I?"

"Oh com'on, it's nothing bad! I promise I'll be a perfect gentleman. Just trust me. Pleeeease?"

Freya's ears slicked back and she shrank an inch, not sure how to interpret his hungry look. She'd withstood flirting from several angles, lewd and amorous alike, but thankfully from within her own race, where it was easy to read and deflect. Humans and Burmecians just didn't have *that* kind of chemistry, after all. Fortunately as well, she'd witnessed plenty of Zidane's womanizing in the past and this wasn't the same animal—this was more like mischief, the kind you'd find on a boy who'd just snuck a cookie out of the jar.

Still, the indecency of it all. She held her robe closed tight, not even daring. “Not until you tell me what you’re going to do!”

“I want to give you a backrub.”

What.

She gaped at the idea, as inane and unexpected as it was, but all signs pointed to him being completely serious. The only betrayer to his good intentions was the inscrutable swishing of his tail.

“Com’on, you’ll like it! I give Dagger backrubs all the time.”

“Yes, but—” Freya sputtered, “She’s your wife!”

“And you’re my friend! You’ve looked uptight all evening—you said you can’t even sleep. I can help you, you know, loosen up.”

“I am not uptight,” she growled, a little too forcefully to invalidate his point. He crossed his arms and waited with a smug smile for his point to sink in.

Point conceded, she sighed. “…Fine, but one false move and your tail is on a platter, Zidane Tribal.”

“Eheh, don’t worry!” he assured, and whether it was the invitingly plush sofa, the lack of sleep or the alcohol talking, she actually bought it. The flimsy robe glided off her slender shoulders and gathered around her hips, defending what was left of her modesty (to his credit, Zidane didn’t take advantage of the sneak peek again). She stretched over the length of seats and folded her hands under her cheek, leaving her backside to the open, vulnerable air.

Freya dispelled the last of her hesitation with a long breath as she felt the stuffing shift and sink with an extra weight, and before she could even say “go” Zidane was at work, starting at the base of her neck.

“Eee! Cold!”
‘Sorry. Damnedest thing, it’s either my feet or my hands that’re always cold. I can’t get them warm no matter what I try.’
“That’s odd. Sounds like an old acquaintance of mine. He had poor blood circulation.”
“Hmm.” He trailed his fingers through the tender slate fur along her spine, testing his new playground.
‘Ooo, soft.’
“Ah-ah-ah, that tickles!”

“Hehe. Just relax, you’re all tense.”
“I will when you stop tickling me!”

The battle-hardened Dragon Knight couldn’t get over the novelty of her situation. She’d never been near a backrub before, really. Fratley wouldn’t and couldn’t; even if the thought sprang to his mind, Burmecian hands were ill-suited to the job, all knobby joints, hair and claws. Zidane’s were broad clown-mitts, calloused pads on one side and milk-silk on the other, the strange hybrid of hardship and finery. She didn’t want to admit it right away, but he was very good with them, and she didn’t want to ask how that became so—probably some odd bandit story.

Their banter cooled into hums and contented murmurs, neither having much to say. Freya let him knead her lean, knotted muscles into slack dough, and she melted under the pampering. Her mind slipped into ease along with her body, dwelling only on the tactile pleasure of the experience rather than how socially awkward it was to have skipped out of her husband’s bed in the middle of the night and submitted to a backrub from another married man—one not even her species, but that’s okay because he’s an old, trustworthy friend and— “Damnit, Zidane, this feels so good…”

He gave a little self-satisfied chuckle. “Told ya you’d like it.”

—and, and… She wondered if Fratley had noticed she was gone yet.

“…Zidane?”

“Yeah?”

She wasn’t sure where the question came from, even as it issued from her wine-loosened tongue. It must have been brewing in the back of her mind for weeks, maybe months, maybe the gods only knew how long, and whether all that back-rubbing had scrubbed it to the surface or what, it was too late to take it back. “Is there a difference between love of a ma—a person, and love of an idea?”

“Huh? Love the idea of what? What’re you talking about?”

“What I mean is, can you be in love with… being in love? Without actually *being* in love?”

“Uh, erm…” he trailed off uncertainly, and then waded back out of the muddling query with more confidence, “Yeah. Yeah, definitely. I mean, there’s courtly love and all that and… I dunno. Why?”

“I just… I don’t know.” She didn’t know why she was opening up like this, at this time, to this person, much less why these thoughts were bubbling up *now*. “Before we were married, I wasn’t sure which I was truly in love with: him or the idea of being in love with him.…or the idea that he was in love with me.”

“Fratley…?” he presumed.

She nodded somberly.

“Ah. Never did remember you, did he?”

“It would be so much easier if he did.”

“Well, if I ever saw a guy who loved someone, he definitely loves you. What’s up with the second thoughts? You’re married and got two kids, now. What more proof of his love do you need?”

“I don’t doubt it anymore. I know he loves me.”

“Well then. Don’t *you* love *him*?”

“I thought I did.”

Zidane didn’t respond to that, and she was far too relaxed to turn her head and read his face. His hands continued to talk for him, firm and soothing across

her back, and by whatever sweet curse had lured her into this room in the first place, she kept going.

“I don’t think the man I fell in love with is ever coming back. I thought he did—I thought, if we said we’d forget the past and start anew, love would bloom again. Even if it wasn’t just like before, it would still be… I don’t know what I’m saying.”

“It’s okay,” he said gently.

“I think I was fooling myself the whole time. He’s not the same person he was before he left. He’s just so… docile! He pets me and takes care of me and the children and washes the dishes and calls me ‘love,’ but that wasn’t… it’s just not the same.”

“Married life changes people.”

She pushed herself upright and twisted to meet him face-to-face, as if explaining things that way would be more effective. A second check pulled her robe back up to her chest. “It’s not just that. I thought I fell in love with…” She shook her head and silver locks swept the shallow slope of her brow, seemingly clearing her mind. ‘Back then, he wasn’t just a comrade, he was a companion. He helped me through all the hard training to become a Dragon Knight, and after everything we went through

together, and everything he taught me, I thought we, I thought we *had something*. But then, I think it was you said… courtly love, some kind of mockery of the real thing, meant to spare my feelings. If he ever really loved me, would he ever have LEFT?' She cut the air with her clawed hand, as if conducting a choir of outrage. "Would he, Zidane? Do people abandon the ones they love!"

"Freya…"

She wilted, her temper spent and melancholy left for change. "I think I love him. I thought I loved who he was. Now I don't think I ever did."

Zidane's lips thinned with a frown. He put a sympathetic hand on her shoulder. "Com'on, relax, you're all wound up again. Is this what's been bothering you this whole time?"

It could've been, it could've been. She'd surprised herself, saying those things out of anger. Was she really so angry? Did she really feel so miserable? Now she only felt terrible, and she didn't know whom to apologize to, or what for. She sat in a puddle of shiftless guilt, trying to reconcile her new feelings with herself.

At length, she brushed a clump of hair behind her ear and remembered her company. “I’m sorry, I just ranted your ears off, and you’re being so kind to me.”

Zidane offered one of his trademark easygoing shrugs. “Hey, that’s what friends are for.”

Freya returned a faint smile, and for a while both listened only to the gnawing burn of logs in the fire.

“I don’t know what to tell you,” Zidane eventually spoke, apparently still thinking on her dilemma, ‘This isn’t the kind of thing someone else can fix for you. You’ve got to listen to your own heart and figure it out for yourself.’ He took his eyes off the flame to meet hers, trying to be sincere and direct, even if he could only pull off both at once for a moment. “Either way, I’ll always try to support you, whatever you do.”

That’s what friends are for. If Freya did not know how to recognize love, she at least knew when she had a good friend. “Thank you.”

Her gaze lingered on the bottle on the table and her thirsty glass beside it. “I need another drink,” she sighed.

“How do you guys kiss?”

How much time had passed? Freya could not recall. It was still night, was the best she could reckon, and it wasn’t too long ago that the last of their wine was depleted. She and Zidane had indulged once more in progressively nonsensical chatter until one and then the other and then both wanted to lie down—on the sofa, for the sake of laziness. Freya succumbed to her friend’s clingy drunkeness without protest, only caring to stay comfortable and warm as the room’s bright fire dwindled to ashes.

She bent her neck to look down at him, but merely got a noseful of hair. He smelled like old books, unwashed linen and… lemon tarts, incidentally. “I beg your pardon?”

“I mean, uh, how do Burmecians kiss each other? You’ve kinda got a muzzle, there, and teeth all in the way…”

She picked her chin up, trying to avoid the swerving, demonstrative finger aiming for it, until she finally got annoyed and pushed Zidane’s hand back down. “We don’t, and that’s terribly rude to ask.”

“Sorry, sorry, just wonderin’. You guys don’t know what you’re missing, though.…Do you lick, then?”

“Zidane!”

“Oh com’on! Just curious.”

“I’m going to play the ‘none of your business’ card on that one, thank you.”

“Aww. Spoil’sport.”

“Hrmph,” she grunted softly and closed her eyes, sinking into rest. The late (early?) hour and warm, full belly of wine were finally taking their toll.
Zidane must have gotten the same notion. Lying at her side on the edge of the sofa, his arm draped loosely across her middle, she could feel his breathing gradually tempering into snoozing.

“I love being touched.”

She peeled one bemused eye open. “What?”

“I mean, uh, not like that,” he started rambling in a weary rasp, “Like hugged, cuddled, petted, whatever… human contact. It’s, like… when you can touch someone, you’re *connected* to them, you know what I’m saying? I guess I sound all girl… ish. I mean, no offense, you being a girl, and, uh…”

He swallowed and said in a spurt of self-awareness, “Wow, I miss being sober right about now.”

Freya sniffed, amused. “Aha, it’s quite all right. You’re rather cute when you’re sloshed, I must admit.”

“Gee, thanks.” Her companion yawned, and Freya realized she could fall asleep, right where she was. Wait, wasn’t she going back to her bed? Shouldn’t Zidane go back to his? *No, too comfortable here… don’t want to move.*

Then, on the brink of dreams, she faintly discerned a delirious, “…ohh, so lonely… so scared of dying alone.”

“What are you talking about?” she mumbled, far too tired to raise an interrogation.

“…I don’t know.”

Then it was quiet again, the sound of sleep. Freya faded into the lull, her last vision the eerie crimson highlight on the tips of her whiskers.

3. Formalities

A/N: Thanks to fyre byrd, The RPGenius, ThistleDemon (though I decided against changing the dialogue's format, on second thoughts) and the rest of my reviewers for the help.

Freya never won the bet again.

Like the seventh, the eighth reunion didn't have staying power in her memories because of the party, but rather for what took place after.

The formalities had to be addressed first, though.

She could hardly forget His newly christened Majesty King Puck II ("Didn't know I had a fancy number after my name either, didja Garnet?") making an appearance. That past winter, the Burmecians' liege had finally come of age, and Puck readily shed the official supervision of his royal retainer and regent, Minister Uthor. The minister still attended him like a hawk at every function, politely snipping at the king's errant language ('Your Majesty, 'Are there any pimpass ho bitches in da

house’ is *not* a proper way to announce yourself,’) only now Puck could legally tell him to “bugger off” when His Majesty grew tired of the censorship—this, of course, was opposed to Prince Puck’s former policy of just doing whatever the hell he wanted behind Uthor’s back.

Uthor watched Zidane teach Puck, Adele and Brit how to rig a Tetra Master deck with flan cards and a double-sided coin, and responded to Fratley’s question of Burmecia’s “coming along” with, “I pray for our future.”

In light of Puck’s visit, the reunion became more his “royal coming out party” than anything, and Garnet’s ballroom bustled with an usual crowd of nobles. Her friends either lingered on the fringes of the festivities or wove themselves into it, everyone losing track of each other in quick time. Soon all Garnet could hear was the thrum of her many guests, their cacophony battling the rich melody of violins across the high domed ceiling.

“Dagger!”

The queen spun away from a tray of biscuits, her pearly evening gown bunching around her ankles. She spotted her husband pushing through the throng to meet her, two strange men tailing him.

One was clothed like a Treno nobleman, his sash branded in the House of Bishop. Dark hair was glossed back from a clean, young, plain face and smart eyes.
The other man was old, stout and hairy, save the crest of his head—his bald sheen could blind overpassing birds on a sunny day. He was heavy with a clutter of chains and amulets that sat across a field-green mantle fringed with gold. Garnet gave a short smile and bow to acknowledge them while Zidane introduced his companions.

“Dagger, this is Barley, the Earl of Bishop,” he indicated the younger and leaner of the two. Zidane wore a satisfied grin as he spoke, as if he were showing off a prized catch.

Barley swung low in full courtesy and kissed Garnet’s hand. “Your Majesty, it is an honor to meet you.”

“And, speaking of, this is the bishop of Esto Gaza,” Zidane played a poor pun, though it bounced safely off the mentioned party.

“It is likewise an honor,” the bishop uttered in a bellow, imitating the earl’s posturing with more waddling than gentlemanly grace. He righted himself with a jingling clatter and gestured to the

Genome. “I must say, madam, your husband has some very interesting theories on domestic policy.”

Garnet vaguely remembered Esto Gaza’s bishop from her journey to his icy shrine, though this was a different man. He must be the new bishop, she conjectured, the old one a casualty to Gaia’s war (the holy grounds he was tending were, after all, ravaged by Iifa’s roots.) The queen didn’t neglect to donate a pinch of Alexandria’s funds to Esto Gaza’s reconstruction, as part of her general policy of good will.

“Does he?” Garnet’s brow lifted incredulously, and in turn Zidane waggled his eyebrows suggestively, smug smile still stuck where she last saw it. She shot him a quick, wary leer before returning pleasant attention to her guests.

“Why yes, and if he isn’t the spitting image of the late Lord King, I wouldn’t know any better!” the bishop cawed into a bellylaugh and slapped Zidane on the back.

A prickle crawled down Garnet’s spine and both she and her consort blanched. Zidane, suddenly struck abash, excused himself with a restrained smile. “Gentlemen, I’ll leave you to your fun.” He bowed out of the circle and stepped clear of Garnet’s

sight, disappearing into the dizzy parade of polite dance, drink and laughter.

The earl looked over his shoulder and slightly bit his lip, as clueless as the next man, but retaining enough sense to see that something amiss had been said. The garish bishop was entirely unfazed. “Look at him, taking off like that! I wonder what got into him. Well, Your Majesty will surely provide us happy company this evening, yes?”

Garnet drew a tall breath, put on her best company mask and nodded. “Of course. So, what was your relationship with Lord King?”

Zidane made a bee’s course to the doors, but was snagged just short of the exit. He twisted a look down at the hand that tugged his belt, followed a milky arm up to a face and jumped a notch, surprised at whom he meeting eye-to-eye, now.

“Well well,” he clucked, planting his hands on his hips and granting his interruption a full, grinning appraisal. “Look at this lovely lady. You’ve gotten so tall!”

“Tee hee,” Eiko Carol giggled and twirled in place, her blue dress and its white frills billowing like an ocean wave. She abruptly stopped and likewise put her wrists to her sides, looking ever impetuous. “You silly! Of course that’s what lovely ladies do when they grow up!”

She was growing up, wasn’t she? He spent a blink calculating her age—fifteen now—though the effort felt lame when he remembered that he just had to deduct ten years from his own age. It was actually a point of contention when they’d first met (“You do realize that I’m sixteen and you’re *six*, right?” “Just give me a few years!”)

Eiko had shot up fast, tall and reedy, even if her horn-nub notably hadn’t (he remembered catching her at Trance, once—that dinky little summoners’ ornament had transformed into a long, graceful unicorn-spear that split her ethereal green tresses down the middle. Trance had strange effects on one’s appearance, it seemed.)
Hell, Zidane fleetly thought, *he* had more of a figure than she did, but then again he’d taken enough ribbing from the Tantalus guys over that to last through Eiko’s puberty. She was probably going to be one of those “late bloomers,” and gods help the menfolk of Lindblum when she did.

“And now you have to dance with me, because that’s what gentlemen do at times like these!”

He took the girl’s assertive hand, kissed it and amiably led her out to the dance floor. “How could I refuse?”

Freya nibbled embarrassingly rodent-like on a cake that had the misfortune of passing her way. Never mind that it was the waitstaff’s job to walk around with trays of goodies; the Burmecian amused herself with the thought that the cake was doomed from birth to cross her path. It was the best she could do to stave off all the other boring alternatives.

Garnet all but staggered into Freya’s corner. “Goodness gracious, I think I lost him,” she huffed.

Freya wiped stray crumbs from her muzzle and had to ask, “What happened?”

“Have you met the new bishop of Esto Gaza?”

“No, why?”

“Good, don’t,” Garnet flatly insisted.

Freya smirked. “That bad, huh?”

The queen dipped like a duck and stuck out her tongue with a petite gag in comically unlady-like pantomime. Freya offered a good-natured laugh for her trouble.

Her point vaguely (if humorously) made, Garnet righted her bearings, straightened her apparel and cleared her composure with a brisk sigh. “I just got free. Have you seen Zidane? I could kill him.”

Freya admittedly shook her head. “Perhaps you’re too late. I saw Eiko carry him off to dance a while ago.”

“Oh.” Stumped on that note, Garnet settled for standing in discourse with her friend. “So how’re you? Where’s Fratley? And the twins?”

“I’m fine, thank you. Fratley’s putting the children to bed.”

“Oh. How considerate of him.” The queen cast a scanning glance over the room. She wrung her thumb with her other hand and tinged her heart-shaped face with a frown. “I hope Zidane doesn’t stay up all night and wear himself out. The doctor warned him about that.”

Freya’s ear nearer Garnet picked up. “Hmm? Doctor?”

“Oh,” Garnet snapped back to look at her, as if just noticing that she was speaking out loud. “It was horrible. Zidane drives me sick with worry, sometimes. I guess you didn’t hear.”

“Hear about what?”

“It was a few months ago. One of Steiner’s knights found him collapsed at the foot of the stairs in the grand vestibule.”

“Zidane?” Freya begged clarification, alarmed by the tale.

“Yes. Seems he fainted and fell. He didn’t break any bones, thank God, but the castle physician said he has a bad heart. Doctor Tot recommended a healthier regimen to him, but God’s blood, Zidane is so stubborn. I can’t make him stick to it.”

Freya swallowed the last of her cake, looked at the ground and scratched her chin in consideration. “I’m sorry to hear that.”

Garnet shook her head, her concerned visage shrinking into the pits of her eyes. “It’s all right.” She picked up her dress and braced herself for another voyage into the crowd. “I’m going to find Mister Barley again. He must be wondering where in the world I disappeared to.”

Freya nodded her off, not knowing a Barley and not daring to ask. She, like many, never overcame the novelty of Garnet's ability to integrate into any concourse. Any other queen would be given a ten-foot royal berth at every turn, especially in her own castle. Perhaps Alexandria's court was acclimatized by now to their queen walking straight up to issues and confronting them, forsaking the decorum of her position. Conservative nobles squawked at the indignity of it, politicians admired her direct approach, and the castle guard groaned at her vulnerability. The straight of it was that Dagger could blend in anywhere, to Beatrix and Steiner's everlasting chagrin, Freya imagined.

The Dragon Knight wondered how much of that quality Her Majesty owed to her adventures with her friends.

"Good luck."

Zidane rolled his shoulders, working free of the tight, itchy dress clothes his wife sweetly demanded he wear, and with a smile, to boot. That never stopped him from whining before and pouting after

the fact. He'd never be able to stand nobles' wear for very long.

He kicked the last of the odious clothing off his foot and into the lap of a nearby chair, and then stepped into the loose, silky comfort of his favorite (well, only, actually) habit. He threaded his tail through the slit in the back and pinched the soft, airy, cotton-heavy fabric, still marveling at the Cleyrans' technique. It was a shame what happened to…

Zidane blinked back the memory, opting not to relive it at the moment. He sat on his side of the great four-poster bed in the castle's master bedroom, blew out the lamp on the bed-table, beat his pillows into a cushy pulp and nestled in for a nap.

Far downstairs, a party still stepped and flowed to the music, but he was too tired to put up with it any longer. He liked the other reunions, the ones where he didn't have to run around and look "presentable" for all the high-class snobs—he only ever did it for Garnet's sake; he couldn't care less what the nobles thought of him.

He'd camp out on top of the bed, waiting for Garnet, and then… then…

A deep, timeless snooze later, he was roused to shifting sheets and the muffled creak of the mattress. A lithe human form slid into the covers, its heat pooling at Zidane’s back. He didn’t even have to move an eyelash—he knew her by her flowery perfume, the breezy gloss of her satin shift and the alluring shape of her body as she cozied up to him.

Her hand reached across him, parted the fabric closed at his collar and slipped under his robe, feeling across his chest. He felt her breath on his neck and repressed a grin. Like a birdwatcher fretful of disturbing the view, Zidane didn’t budge one inch or otherwise let her know he was awake, though his tail gave one involuntary, betraying flick.

He felt her playing his tender ribs like a piano and choked down the pleasured rumbling in his throat. It was definitely getting harder to keep quiet. What exactly was she doing?

As much as he was enjoying this, curiosity bid him speak. That purr he was fighting broke through the first word, making him sound like a bumbling teenager. “Looking for something, babe?”

Garnet sighed, relaxed and squeezed him into a hug. The game was over, whatever it was, to Zidane’s disappointment. “You think I didn’t see

you? You didn’t touch your plate at supper. You’re still all skin and bones.”

Her husband rolled his eyes at the impromptu check-up and rolled to face her. “You worry too much about me.”

She scoffed faintly. “And I don’t have good cause to? You heard what the doctor said about—”

“Yeah, yeah, eat right and all that. I will! You make it sound like I never eat,” he chuckled.

“As far as I can see you never do,” she dourly remarked.

“Tch. You know that’s ridiculous.” He kissed her cheek, making light of her worry.

“I know, but I don’t see!” Her resolve propped her up on one elbow to talk down at him, “Zidane, why are you always so difficu—”

“Okay, okay!” He reeled her back to the pillows with a steady hand. “I’m fine. Really. You can quit worrying.” He petted her raven hair, trying his best to console. Her flicker of a smile showed it was working.

“So what, party’s over?” he asked, taking a more pleasant sidetrack.

Garnet sank into the sheets with a weary sigh, eyes yet wide and boggling. “Thank goodness. I can’t believe all those people showed up with King Puck.”

“They were probably just curious to see how he’d make a scene and embarrass Uthor.”

“He is very good at that, yes.” Garnet then made a miffed frown and poked him again in the ribs. “Anyway, quit changing the subject. You’re terrible, you always do that when you don’t want to talk about something. Next time we’re at supper I want to see you clear your plate or you’ll be in trouble!”

“Yes mommy,” he jokingly patronized. A pinch later, his cry was, “Ow!”

“Hehe, I mean it. Please don’t make me worry about you.”

Ridiculous or not, her gentle, concerned smile drove all the argument left out of him. Capitalizing on her improved mood, Zidane shifted to lean over her and said in a deep, salacious tone, “Well, now that you mention it, I am hungry…”

Tail fuzz snaked around her leg, and she stifled a ticklish laugh. “Oh?”

“Yeah…” he breathed, and a rogue hand groped the giving flesh of her thigh. “Maybe for a little of this…” He punctuated the idea with a kiss, and then another, each deeper, until Garnet was too captivated to stop the northerly exploring hand. “…and this…”

She gave his kisses back and caught a breath, just enough to protest, “Zidane! Hehe. Hey, you’re changing the subject *again*!”

Garnet narrowed her blushing gaze on her husband—his pale hair was a canvas to the red and blue tint of the moons outside the balcony, and purple shadows accented his wily grin. “Tell me you don’t like it.”

She didn’t say.

“When’s the last time I had you all to myself like this?”
“I can’t remember…”
‘Me neither. Hey Dagger, what did you think of that Barley guy?’
“Hmm? Oh, I don’t know. He was polite.”
“Yeah, he’s a nice guy. He has honest eyes.”
‘Zidane, what are you talking about…?’

“Nothing, nothing.…I love you.”
“I love you too. Now try to get some sleep.”

The heat of their bed gradually dissipated, and in her cool sleep she didn’t even feel the feather-light kiss on her forehead before her husband dressed and left.

4. Secrets

A/N: Thanks once again to The RPGenius for proofreading.

After the festivities had been quelled for the night, Freya best remembered standing in front of the full-length mirror in her guest quarters, her husband fast asleep under the bedcovers behind her, the blue moonlight pooling at her feet around the silhouettes of extinguished lamps, the red moonlight framing a scenic painting of Alexandria Plateau on the wall, and a complimentary silk robe, clean as the soapy white of her hair, balanced delicately on her shoulders. For a surreal moment her reflection resembled the angelic personification of the Dragon God Reis, just as she'd seen in midnight-stained glass portraits, but with a forced blink the blasphemous imagery passed.

Freya focused on her appearance a moment longer, and then nearly laughed out loud at considering whether or not to wear a shift under the robe. She shook her head, berating her silly

expectations, tied the garment with a sound knot around her waist and drifted out the door, embarking on some scheduled late-night wandering.

Again, she reminded herself on route, it was silly to expect to see him there again, and she consoled herself with the plan that if he wasn't, she would have the whole room to herself to quietly contemplate life or… hell, who knows, read a book. She would find something to do. She didn't want to sleep the night away, not this one—she couldn't when she tried, anyway.

Her bare feet made the journey with few wrong turns and only one guard's piqued suspicion, which was shown in a slight turn of the head and lifted eyebrows. She wasn't worried about what the guards thought, though. She was confident not one of them would speak up, knowing whom she was and especially whom she was to their queen. It wasn't as if she were up to any trouble, anyway.

She took a draughty stairwell to the refurbished lower wing of the castle and followed a shadow-blanketed carpet runner to a promising shaft of firelight. Freya poked her snout into that open doorway and surveyed the room ahead with peering sniffs and pricked ears.

The teasing aroma of burning wood, wine and steamy tea greeted her, and she walked right in, finding almost the exact picture of last year. The added feature was a small silver tray with two cups and a teakettle, idling on the corner of the table.

Zidane, catching sidelong sight of her, cracked a grin and shut his book. “Hey, I was wondering when you were going to show up!”

The Burmecian picked her chin up with a coy smile and affected aloofness. “How silly of you. I was just going for a walk.”

“Because you can’t sleep, huh?” he put in her mouth, and when she chuckled admittedly he motioned her over to sit. “Haha, come right in. Want something to drink? I actually have tea this time,” he informed her in a mock-haughty tone.

“I’ll take a cup then, thank you,” she responded as a matter of course.

He poured them each a cup and started the usual chit-chat. “So, how’s Burmecia? How’s the reconstruction coming along? I haven’t been there in a long while. I should visit sometime soon.”

“You should. It’s greatly improved.” Both ears swooped in thoughtful arcs. “It will never be the

same, but…”

“It’s still home, right?”

She nodded solemnly.

Zidane reached over to the table’s far end and procured a pile of cards, which he began to shuffle. “Hey, you wanna play cards? I shouldn’t be much of a challenge; I’m pretty rusty, eheh.”

Freya couldn’t turn down a challenge, for fun or not. “Sure, you’re on.”

“Really? That’s great. Do you have a deck?” Immediately assuming the negative, he split the stack in two and passed a half to her. “You can take this.”

She was startled a bit by his abrupt, hurried manner, but accepted her lot and began to sift through it. Her opponent brushed the tabletop between them clean and gestured away the initiative. “Since I’m such a good sport, you get the first move.”

Freya sniffed at the display of good faith, amused that he would even think of cheating—such an attempt would not have escaped her easily. He knew that she knew his card tricks too well, because he’d

tested most of them on her, usually and frustratingly without notice (“Are we ever going to play a *legitimate* game of cards?” ‘I don’t know what you’re talking about, my dear Freya.’ “Oh shut it and deal.” “Mwehehe.”)

“You just say that because I saw you give your double-sided coin to Brit.” Up her tonberry card went.

“Touché, but don’t think I’m playing nice because I’m out of tricks!” Down her tonberry went, up with his gimmie cat. “I haven’t had anyone to play with in forever. The scholars around here only care about sticking their noses in books and Dagger’s always too busy.”

Mythril sword took gimmie cat and tonberry for a combo. “I see.”

His next move took her by absolute surprise. “Did you ever figure out the answer to your problem? About Fratley?” Wyerd took back gimmie cat.

Freya didn’t know which was more disconcerting: that this wasn’t about cards anymore or that she knew exactly what he was asking about. “No…” she replied sincerely, “But I’m going to do

what's in Adele and Brit's best interest. They need their mother and father, a whole family." The bitter residue in her voice flashed Zidane back to a conversation they'd had shortly after meeting for the first time.

"You're an orphan too, huh?"
'I lost my parents when I was very young, yes. After that, becoming a Dragon Knight was all I had to look forward to. The palace became my home. The other knights-in-training and Sir Fratley were the closest to a family I had.'
"Sounds like me and Tantalus."

"I've been praying that love will find our way." She smirked. "As corny as that sounds." Dragonfly took wyerd and gimmie cat by the back door.

"Huh, that's funny. I feel the same way about Dagger."

"Really?"

"Yeah, sort of." Garuda pinched off mythril sword. "Actually, I'd been thinking about that talk we had last time. A lot."

"Oh?" she chirped, wondering which part he was referencing; she remembered several nebulous phases of "talk."

“You know, it was really hard at first.”

“What was?”

“Living here, in this castle. I almost couldn’t stand it.”

Feather circle took back mythril sword via garuda.

He shrugged. “You know me, Freya. I grew up on the streets, with thugs and loud pubs and pick-pockets…” He threw a thumb over his shoulder, vaguely indicating the scene of the party. “Hell, ten years ago I would’ve been in that ballroom cleaning out those twats’ pockets, not introducing them to my wife.”

“Married life changes people,” she quoted him back, not trying to be sardonic, but the irony pushing through nevertheless.

Grimlock lost to feather circle. He snorted grimly. “Heh, I guess so. I just didn’t want to live like this, I guess, especially not at first. It wasn’t that I don’t love being near Dagger. This castle bores me to death, is the problem, and I didn’t want to dress up and play a noble all the time, on top of that. But I eventually caved and did it for her, because she needed a husband that wasn’t a public-relations

disaster, I guess. And I just kept giving in and doing it, until…" He combed a clump of hair out of one eye and sighed wistfully. "I can't even remember what I used to do with my days, before I left Tantalus. I think it was because, with the guys, we didn't *have* a routine. We just did what we wanted, and always got by, somehow. I still miss that, sometimes."

"You seem to get by with a lot here," Freya stretched for consolation, though she was really just stabbing at it. She had no idea what Dagger and Zidane did day-to-day.

He grinned and laughed something sarcastic. "Yeah, wow, they let me sleep in 'til lunch now. Right there was a little war in itself." He set aside the last of his hand face-down and wagged his finger. "When I first moved in, Rusty was beating down my door at the ass-crack of dawn every morning, yelling at me to get dressed, go down to the table and eat breakfast. Even Dagger was on his side for a while, calling me a 'terrible morning person' and everything. I think one of her servants got a potato soup facial before they finally learned that *that* ship wasn't gonna fly."

Freya snickered at the crude anecdote. Ragtimer went up. Her hand now empty, she filled it with her teacup.

Getting back to his relatively serious point, Zidane started rambling, “I just, it’s just that I think I’ve been trying to make Dagger happy and pretend I’m someone I’m not for so long that I just… *became* that person.” He scratched his head, evidently confused. “Now I don’t know what to do with myself. I still don’t fit in here—I’m never going to, I’m just a ‘filthy commoner’ to them, I see the way they look at me when Dagger’s not around—those nobles, I mean, and even the guards sometimes, but not Tot or Beatrix or Steiner—well, sometimes Steiner, ha. And I can’t ever go back to Tantalus. I haven’t even visited those guys in years.…Just thinking about them now makes me feel like a bastard.”

Her tail flicked uneasily. This conversation wasn’t taking a pleasant route, and she had no idea how to cheer it up. “Zidane…”

He laughed darkly, as if he’d just picked up the punch line to a bad joke. “Haha, and I sit down here some nights, wondering why I’m unhappy.”

Freya stared sullenly into her tea. “I didn’t know you were so miserable.”

Her friend lightened up and shook his head with a resigned smile. “It’s not that bad. I did—I do it for Dagger. I don’t want her to ever feel alone. Her company is worth it, I think. That’s what love is all about, right? You gotta compromise to make each other happy.” Their eyes then met, her pale green to his hollow blue, and she realized his rhetoric was more begging reassurance than giving it.

Freya was rattled with the very sudden urge to jump up, grab him by the shoulders and shake hard. She wasn’t talking to the person she saw at the parties, the guy spinning tall tales for kids and pulling his beloved aside to steal quick, giggling kisses—it suddenly looked like a farce, all of that, and now she was looking at the thing that was left behind after he’d shed all the trappings of marriage and princehood. That thing looked beaten, sickly and, and *old*—the gods’ blood, he was only in his twenties, how could sit there like that with his oversized monk-clothes and snowy Kuja-hair and dark smudges under his tired eyes that some spectacles thought they could hide—His younger, more robust self might’ve screamed, or cried, or hit something, but this version of Zidane just sat there,

passively staring into nothing. Something deep inside had been broken and stuffed away where it would be hidden, and Freya desperately wanted to slap him until that shell of a queen's spouse crumbled to pieces and his good old sense stepped out.

She sat stiffly and quietly, nursing her teacup.

Zidane mumbled to himself, bowed and shifted strangely in place, as if shrugging a heavy load off his back. He then sat straight back up, an airy quip ready on his tongue. "Sorry, I didn't mean to go off like that. Is it something about this room or what? Heh." He rubbed his nose bashfully. "I was actually hoping you could give me some advice, 'bout something else. I guess it's kinda related, except… Okay, I guess it's not really. You don't really have to help or anything, if you don't want to. I just need someone to listen. Can you do that for me? Please?"

Freya refreshed herself with a deep breath. "I'll see what I can do." Why did she have the feeling it was only going to get worse from here?

"Thanks." He rubbed his hands together and stared at the far corner of the rug as he spoke. "You see, I want Dagger to have someone to make her feel loved—someone that'll give her a real family and

take care of her and love her for who she is, rich or poor, sickness and health and all that.…Even if that someone isn't me."

"What are you talking about?" Yes, getting worse.

"Uh, well. Dagger's council has been on her back a lot lately about an heir."

Freya rolled up her eyes and ears, pondering the implications; both leveled again when the coin dropped. "Oh. That's right, Dagger has no real connection to Alexandria's royal family, and even if she did, no one in that family is left alive. Without a child, her kingdom is bequeathed to…?"

"Nobody, for now, and that's what's making her council uneasy. They want the 'problem' settled before the all the nobles get antsy and start pulling tricks, trying to get a shot at the throne. I think the phrase 'political upheaval' got thrown around a coupla times, hell if I know what the big deal is."

"But you can't give her that heir," she got ahead of him.

He swayed in his seat uncomfortably and frowned. "Yeah. I can't. It's not her, it's me. The doc

here even made a point to check Dagger out—see if she's fit for child-bearing."

"She is then, I presume."

He nodded. "As far as everybody can tell." He looked to her and opened his arms in another shrug. "So now we got a bit of a problem, right? And it's not like Dagger and I don't want a kid, you know. She really wants a family of our own, and so do I. It's just… I was thinking, about how to get around this. Or at least how to shut Dagger's advisors up about it until… um… hmm," he trailed off and dropped eye contact again.

"You think you could adopt a child, the way Dagger was adopted by Brahne?"

"That's a possibility, though difficult to pull off. We'd have to make it look like the kid is really Dagger's, at least to the outside world, otherwise they won't accept the kid as her heir. You expect Dagger to parade around for nine months, pretending to be pregnant?"

Freya made a mired frown, put down her teacup and crossed her arms. "Hmm, I see how that's troublesome."

“Yeah. There’s another option, as much as it puts me out.”

“What is it?”

“A surrogate.”

She blinked. “A surrogate… what, *father*?”

“Yeah.”

“That’s… that’s ridiculous,” she spoke her mind. If she had to be outraged on his behalf, she *would*, Zidane’s stolid complacency be damned.

To her soaring disbelief, he actually began advocating the notion. “It’d actually be legit, though, and that’s the killer. Even if the child’s a bastard, he’d still be Dagger’s. That’s the only important part.”

“You wouldn’t possibly agree to that, though,” she stated with more than a little doubt. She wasn’t yet sure if he was seriously considering letting someone else father his wife’s child.

“I can’t say Dagger’s for it,” he ceded. “I just wish I could tell those monkeys on her back to wait a little longer,” he added in a nearly-inaudible breath.

“How would that help?” Freya asked, not overlooking the remark.

For a second, his expression resembled something she found on a chocobo once: startled alarm. (She remembered watching the chocobo vanish into the trees the next instant, Quina’s fork still stuck in its hindquarters.) When the second passed, Zidane was back to watching his thumbs fidget, oblivious to her query.

“Zidane?” she tried again.

“Freya,” he finally spoke up, his tone heavy yet soft with an entreaty, “If I tell you something… something really, really serious… can you keep it a secret? I haven’t told anybody yet, and I can’t let it get out. Can I trust you?”

She nearly balked at such ominous secrecy, but then rallied her wits and nodded. “Of course. You have my word and confidence.”

“Okay. Good, good. Just, I don’t know how you’re going to react, and…” He pressed his hands together to hold them still and focus. “Okay, okay. I’ll just say it. I’m going to stop soon.”

“Stop what? Rambling?” Freya snipped, wary enough from the suspense and too impatient for his

digressions.

He spit out a quick, nervous laugh and scratched his temple. “No, no no no, ahahaha. Good one. Yeah, I will, but I mean, not that. I mean I’m going to stop. Like a Black Mage.”

It took about ten seconds for the relevance of that to sink in. “…What?”

He merely shrugged, not offering any more.

“What do you mean? What are you saying?” Freya was on her feet before she knew it. When the Black Mages said ‘stop,’ they weren’t talking about walking off their jobs and taking up a worker’s union strike or something—they meant it in the most literal, complete, and final sense. The Mognet mail once dropped through her window that read, bluntly and inflexibly, *“Vivi stopped,”* was the most traumatic thing she’d ever read.

“You can’t be…” This wasn’t some belated letter to be perused at her leisure, though. She was hearing it, right in front of her, and… “That’s not funny.”

Zidane didn’t move. He didn’t even look at her. Every passing, immobile second drove her closer to the edge of panic. She shouted, anything to break the

overbearing silence. “I said this isn’t funny, damni—!”

“I’m not joking!” he screamed and also jumped to his feet, becoming the most animated she’d seen him in years and effectively shocking her into a standstill.
The only ones that breathed in the next moment were Zidane and the fire. The former shook in his place, ragged and glassy-eyed like he could cry, but he was either too proud or too desperate to look his friend straight in the eyes to let tears get in the way.

That was when Freya realized he was speaking the truth. She hiccupped mutely for several moments more before finding her voice again. “…How? Why? How?”

Zidane sighed and relaxed, feverish tension evaporating and calm surrender moving back into place. “It’s… sorta complicated.”

“What do you take me for, a simpleton? Explain it to me! I want to understand.”

“All right. Do you remember Terra? And Garland’s Castle?”

“Of course. We were all there.”

“Yeah. Do you remember what Garland told Kuja after we defeated him? You remember what he said that made Kuja go berserk?”

“He said…” She had to piece the memory with the explanation that was worked-out after the fact. “Kuja’s life was going to end soon. Kuja became distraught because he thought he was going to die, after all the hard work he’d put forth to dominate both Gaia and Terra.”

“That’s right. That’s because Kuja was a first-gen. First-gens are what Garland called the Genomes made in Bran Bal: Kuja, Mikoto, all the guys we rescued from Terra, and me too.” The words came more easily the more he talked; he was in his element when explaining or narrating, rather than confessing. “What the deal was, is that every first-gen was given a predetermined lifespan of twenty-five years—Gaian years, that is, since Terra had to work on Gaia’s time. It’s something ingrained in our genetic code. We can’t get rid of it.”

“Genetic code?”

“Yeah, it’s like a blueprint for your body. At least that’s how Mikoto explained it to me. Everybody has it, from the time you’re born. It’s what makes you look like… you know, you!”

“Okay…” Freya slowly nodded.

“Okay, so all first-gens have this, uh… what did Mikoto call it… ‘genetic inhibitor,’ yeah. The idea was that first-gens would only live long enough for Garland to study them—see how he could design them better, right? Then they would kick off and get out of the way for the newer first-gens. It was Bran Bal’s population control, basically.”

Freya sniffed. “That’s barbaric.”

Zidane put up a lopsided frown and shrug. “Yeah, but like that’s the only thing about Bran Bal that was. Anyway, see this color?” He tousled his whitewashed hair. “It’s just what it looks like on humans: a sign of gettin’ on in years. Once first-gens started to look like me Garland took them into his castle to be his servants until they…” His expression dropped with his arms. “…well. Sometimes he didn’t even bother. The ones he didn’t need anymore Garland put down like dogs.”

“Terrible…”

He hummed in agreement. “Good thing we put a stop to that, right?”

“Yes, but, I still don’t understand why Garland would put such a restriction on the Genomes.” Freya

scratched her chin, ears windmilling as she thought. Zidane, bitten by a silly bug (why did it always come crawling when he was nervous?), resisted the urge to grab them like bicycle handles, and self-consciously checked behind him to see if his tail was such a ridiculous giveaway of mood. It corkscrewed defiantly, confounding him.

“Wasn’t their purpose to receive the souls of Terra once our planets merged? How did Garland expect the Genomes to proliferate with such little time to live?” Freya resumed, and then noticed her companion spinning in circles.

“You are not chasing your tail,” she groaned.

Zidane hopped back to attention. “Uh, oh. No!” He wavered on his toes as the world slowed down, blinked to clear his head, and then grinned sheepishly. “I mean yes. Sorry.”

Freya scowled. “You have the attention span of a child! I can’t believe you’re goofing off at a time like this. This is serious! *You* brought this up, asking for my advice! Are you going back now and saying it’s a joke?”

“No!” he answered in a frightened snap. His gaze fell, suitably browbeaten. ‘Sorry, sorry. You’re right.

Anyway that's easy,' he got back on track, "The second-gens would be born without the genetic inhibitor. They'd live normal human lives. There's already a few in the Black Mage Village, did you know?"

"Second-gens… Second generation? You mean the offspring of the first-gens?"

"Yep."

"Oh, I see. But still, Zidane, you were… you were born on Terra."

He nodded.

"What's going to happen to you?"

He turned towards the fireplace, as if he could look through the flames into the next world. "Well, Garland doesn't need any maids where he's sleepin', so…"

"Zidane!" She stamped her dainty rat-feet. "I'm serious!"

"Hey, so am I!" he shot back with a little more force than intended. Freya was struck quiet. After a long minute, Zidane dropped on the spot and rolled his shoulders forward, hunched like a dog—some kind of pouting deference to the dragoon, it could've

been—Freya never really understood why he sat on the floor when upset. It looked childish.

“I don’t know, okay?” he admitted softly, “Mikoto says—she says it’s the end of the road. I just… this is it. I can’t do anything. I’m just gonna accept my fate.…Just like Kuja.”

Freya shook her head vehemently, not standing for this. “You’re just giving up? But, there has to be something! Some way to stop this! It doesn’t make any sense!”

“Heh,” he chuckled wryly, “Life isn’t something that prides itself on making sense.”

“…I can’t believe this. I can’t believe what you’re saying. How long have you known?”

She could have gaped when he started counting on his fingers. “Four years today.”

“Haven’t you told anyone else?”

“No.”

“My gods, why not? Doesn’t Dagger know?” she raised her voice in disbelief.

“Oh, you’re not going to tell her, are you?” He twisted a pleading look off the fire and onto her. “I

mean it, I don’t want anybody else to know. Especially not Dagger.”

“What…? Why?”

“Just don’t, please?”

“What are you afraid of?” she challenged him, only it wasn’t a game this time, “That she won’t care?”

“Huh?” He seemed genuinely confused for a second. “No, no, it’s not that at all. Actually… I’m afraid she will.”

“What?”

“It’s just… You’re around Puck a lot, aren’t you? And didn’t you work for the king of Burmecia a while, before him? Well, I mean, maybe not *for* him, but you were around the palace.”

“I trained in the palace, and work there now to protect the king, but that’s it. Why?”

“Well then, you might know. I really had no idea how much work it takes to rule a country. I always thought being a king or queen or whatever would just be doin’ whatever you want and giving orders. Boy, did I find out better. Dagger, she’s always working. You’d think there wouldn’t be much to do

in peacetime, but there's always diplomats, and economists, and meetings and visits and luncheons and special ceremonies, and sure, there are lots of people to help out, but she hardy gets any time to herself except for breakfast, lunch and after dinner, and sometimes not even lunch and dinner, and—well, it's stressful, you know? But she's happy, I know she is. She likes her work. She's always saying she wants to be a great queen and help her people. I'm glad I can stay here and let her be happy, even if I can't help much."

He caught himself prattling again and rubbed the back of his neck. "And, ah… I guess what I'm saying is, I don't want to add to that, ya know? Dagger has so much else to worry about, I don't want to burden her with my problems. It wouldn't be fair."

What was she going to say to that? Freya was so flabbergasted she could spit. What kind of man—cowardly—didn't tell his own wife, the very person who made that "til death do us part" vow right next to him—pathetic—wouldn't tell her—how—for *four years*? It was the biggest load of rubbish she'd heard in her life, and she reconsidered the whim to slap the boy silly.

Interpreting the looming silence poorly enough, Zidane shrank into a tighter ball, his tail flexing and unfurling restlessly behind him. “Look what I’ve done. I’m sorry. I shouldn’t’ve unloaded all this on you, either. It’s just, I spent so much time getting used to the idea, and I wanted to tell someone else so badly, I couldn’t keep it inside anymore. But I didn’t think about how it would make you uncomfortable. That was really selfish of me. Forget I said anything.”

“Zidane, I…” She balled her fists, angry and disheartened and unable to believe her ears. “No! I’m not just going to *forget*, I can’t believe you! You don’t get it, do you? You big… fool!” She spun on her heels and marched towards the door with a disgusted huff.

“Freya?” Suddenly panic-stricken at the thought of her walking out angry with him—or worse, her walking out and spilling the beans to the next person she met, Zidane bungled to his feet and leapt clean to the door, just about. “Freya, wait, please!”

Before he could snare her arm, Freya preempted him and turned back, armed with a tongue-lashing. “Aren’t I your friend? Aren’t we all? Were you just going to keep this from all of us?”

“Er—” he choked, taking a turn at losing his words.

“You were, weren’t you?”

“Please don’t tell anyone…”

“Why shouldn’t I?”

“Because I’m trusting you!”

Freya gritted her teeth, stilled by the thought. She did promise, didn’t she? She felt like he’d pulled a card trick on her *again.*

“That’s the only reason I told you at all. I thought, of all my friends, you’re the only one I could talk to about this.” He got worked up into panting exasperation again, trying to mesh his feelings with his thoughts and words. “I just—it’s—I don’t mean to—I’m *scared*, Freya.”

He was scared. The quiet words resonated in her skull, thwarting her brewing fury. Zidane Tribal, who had stood atop the Hill of Despair, pointed at Death and said he wasn’t afraid to die, was *scared*.

He looked at the ground and shrugged once more, arms falling listless at his sides. “…I’m scared.”

She numbly asked the next question, not even wanting the answer but requiring it, “How much… how long, now?”

“A year, about. Maybe less, maybe a little more.”

She swallowed air, grasping for coherent words, some kind of solid reaction to give him. All she did was inflate her sinking stomach.

Zidane lost his nerve again in the lull and began stammering an apology. “I, I’m sorry. I’m sorry I brought this up.” He quickly turned and paced back to the sofa, running a hand through his hair and muttering, ‘Damn, you wonder why I didn’t.’ He began to wave her out the door. “Go on, you can leave if you like. I won’t keep you.”

Oh no, she’d seen too much of that from him—Zidane wasn’t going to push everyone away again, like he did for his last crisis. She was here and she was dealing with this right now. “You can absolutely forget it, I’m not going to bed now!”

“Freya—”

An emphatic stroke of her hands cut his hope-sapping protest off. “No, stop it! Just shut up and let me think… There has to be something we can do.”

He shook his head. “I’ve looked, there’s nothing left. Mikoto agrees, though you know how pessimistic she is and, uh… nevermind,” he quit, having mooted his own point.

“But, the genetic inhibitor, if we can find some way to remove or disable it—”

“There’s only one man who knows how to do that, Freya. We killed him.”

She didn’t have a rebuttal for that. She didn’t have a clue, and she hated most of all to admit that.

“Hey, listen…” He weakly reached out and brushed her hand in a reconciling gesture. “It’s all right. Let’s just forget about that a minute and go back to our game.”

Freya didn’t budge to that idea. She continued to stand in place, racking her brain for a solution she was rapidly beginning to realize wouldn’t come handily.

She looked in on the present again when Zidane deliberately coughed. He was standing over the table and pointing at their neglected cards. “Look, your mythril sword is wide open, there.” He plucked his remaining unplaced card off the table, set it up and demolished the playing field. ‘Once-twice-thrice-

tetra-match,' he chanted as he flipped all of Freya's cards over. "You should've been guarding it better."

Freya, shocked by the turn of play, was lured back to the scene to investigate. A fully-leveled grand dragon had blown her hand away with a combo chain and given Zidane a perfect game.

"Why you cheap little…! How long had you been holding that move back?"

"Until I wanted the game to end," he replied cheekily.

"I thought you said you were rusty!"

"I am; you must really suck," was his alibi.

In her lame defeat, rather than wringing his neck, she laughed despite herself, shaking her head. "I can't believe you!…I can't believe you." Zidane squeaked surprise when Freya abruptly grabbed and pulled him into a hug. He squirmed a little, trying to orient himself in her arms (for such a slight figure, she was quite taller than him), and then settled into her comfort, something he felt she needed more at the moment than he. He took passive note of the trembling in her chest, the scent of rich soap in her hair and the way she swallowed dryly before she could speak.

“God’s blood, Zidane,” she whispered, “This can’t be happening. I’m not ready to lose you. None of us are. Tell me this isn’t happening.”

“Aww, stop that.” He patted her back. “Don’t be sad. It’s alright. Everything’s gonna be alright.”

“How…?” her voice cracked.

He breathed a sigh through the cool white silk of her robe, warming her shoulder. “You’re so strong, Freya. Stronger than you realize. I’ve always admired you for that.”

She frowned sourly at the praise. “It’s more a pretense than you realize. I’m not as strong as I look, believe me.”

“Heh, what is this, self-depreciation night? We both sound pretty pathetic.”

She sniffled and gave an empty laugh. “Hah, we must.” She finally loosed her grip on her friend and spied the corked bottle on the table, shoved behind the tea tray. No, Freya told her nagging drowsiness, she wasn’t going to be able to go to bed any time soon. She didn’t have the nerve to.

“…I fancy some of that wine, now.”

The night was aging; the fire was dying.

The shadows grew thicker, exaggerating every corner, creeping over the backs of furniture and blotting out the gold leaf print on the spines of books. A plume of embers sprang off a collapsing log and sailed out through the chimney, stirring up the most commotion the room had heard in the past hour.

It was a strange condition to simply sit still, very still, in the lap of another, drinking merely of his company. He'd fast grown comfortable in her silence, and she in his. They talked in quiescent sighs, easy heartbeats and quaint touches. Freya wondered which of them was more the pillow to the other, since they leaned on each other as well as into the sofa's embrace.

She didn't dare voice her thoughts, though. If they began chatting again they would invariably talk about… No, she didn't want to deal with it any more for the moment. She wanted to let her heart relax and her mind drift through nothing a little while longer. She wasn't yet ready to let him slip free, because as long as she could feel his subtle pulse and shifting breath in her arms, there was still life there to hold on to.

Amidst the ticking clockwork of each other's bodies, Freya began to pick up a new sound, rather foreign compared to the others. She could have pinned it on the wood-splintering fire, but the disturbance was too local. She could practically feel it: a low, pulsing thrum that spread through her fur.

It crossed her mind that she was holding the source of the noise. During a party a few years ago, Eiko had snuck up on her with a discovery, one freshly gleaned from royal "girl talk."

"He can purr, like a kitty-cat!"
'What? Pardon?'
"Hehe, Zidane! Dagger said he purrs when she pets him! Isn't that just adorable?"
"I… suppose. Why are you sharing this with me?"
"Oh, you're no fun to gossip with!"

Freya considered testing this phenomenon. He did mention that he "loved being touched" last year, even if it sounded like a terrible pick-up line the likes of him would use. She smirked when recalling that he all but tripped over himself, trying to correct the context. Of course, she knew what he meant, but his drunken efforts were cute to watch.

She eventually gave in to curiosity. He was nearly asleep anyway, she told herself, though what

difference that made she wasn’t sure. She furtively searched his clothes, found a soft spot in his side and applied some innocent, therapeutic scratching.

In response, the gentle rumbling intensified and Zidane sighed, his breath quivering like a tiny motor. “Ooh, thanks. That feels great.”

She giggled in her throat, curiosity effectively humored. “It’s true, then. You do purr like a kitten. You’re just full of surprises, aren’t you?”

The fur of his tail bristled (was that blushing?) once that tidbit was brought to light. “I-It’s not that bad!” he squawked defensively.

“Hahaha. Relax, I didn’t say it was bad at all. Why, are you embarrassed?” she prodded him.

“N-no, of course not… It’s nothing to be ashamed of!” he asserted, and Freya could have laughed, especially when she noticed that for all his sensitivity on the topic, he wasn’t making one move to stop her scratching. It was such an amusing picture, she thought: the mouse petting the cat.

It was too bad the episode, as funny as it was, had broken the room’s peaceful spell. Freya realized her folly when the purring ground back into nothing and

Zidane spoke again. “You know… I still haven’t figured out what to do about Dagger’s heir.”

That was a good question she couldn’t answer. “You’re hoping everyone will hold out until you’re out of the picture, aren’t you?” she asked, terrible as that felt to bring up again.

“It’ll be easier when I’m gone,” was all he had to say. She didn’t know what to tell him. He was a little too right.

Since everything was being put down on the table already, Freya went ahead and explored the question, “What’s happening to you… what does it feel like? Does it hurt? Are you ever in any pain?”

“I’m fine, don’t worry about me,” he put her query down.

“Zidane…” she pressed.

He wiggled and relented. “Just sometimes. I’m mostly tired, is all. It’s a weird feeling, like my body’s slowing down one piece at a time and the rest of the pieces don’t know how to deal. So I kinda panic, sometimes, lose my breath. The cramps are the worst. They freaked me out at first, but it always passes, I’m okay.”

“Have you talked to a doctor?”

“Com’on Freya, get real. There isn’t a doctor on this planet that can help me.” He wasn’t exaggerating, oddly enough.

She sharply tapped his head. “I don’t mean about fixing it, you dolt. I’m talking about something for the symptoms. You can get medicine for pain.”

“Aaaactually,” he drawled, ‘I’ve already duped Tot into somethin’.’ He stretched and flexed his wrists, an odd, proud grin pinching one cheek. “You shoulda been there for the story I dished out—Lord Avon himself would’ve given me an award, my acting was that good.”

Freya shook her head with good-humored disapproval. “Your conceit knows no bounds.”

“Hey, it’s not bragging if it’s too true to be good.” He froze and reconsidered himself. “…Wait, I messed that up, didn’t I?”

“Horribly, yes.”

“Damn, I must be losing my touch.”

“I’ll forgive you this once.”

“How gracious of you. Anyway, they all think it’s my heart. Haha. Just my heart. More like just everything. Heh, eheh, heh…” His rueful laugh died on an awkward note, and both friends sat on the portent.

“So…” Zidane spun a glance to her, wide-eyed and interested. “You going to let me go soon?” he asked, his open tone implying that he would be fine with either answer.

Freya settled her chin on top of his head and readjusted her grip around him. “I don’t think I want to.”

He snuggled back into her warmth, gladly accepting it. “So, what now?”

Freya suddenly remembered why she abandoned her soft, cozy guest bed in the first place, and a sheepish grin split her muzzle.

“Backrub?”

It was said in jest, but was so unexpected and inane that it unleashed something fierce. Zidane rolled forward in a burst of laughter, and Freya let him go, an awful case of the giggles paralysing her, as well. For three solid minutes they tumbled about in a strange fit, tanked not so much by the hilarity of

Freya's proposal as by the need to simply, explosively, laugh. It was the proverbial last straw, and even as each recognized how batty they looked, they couldn't help themselves—their laughter broke the grave tension lurking in the room, and that was perfectly welcome. They laughed until they felt their sides would split and they'd never laugh again.

Before she was finished Freya was sitting upside-down on the sofa, feet on the cushions and hair grazing the floor. She gulped deep breaths to quench her hysteria, outrageous grin never leaving her face.

Zidane sat up and rubbed his brow with the back of his hand, still sputtering. "Ah, haha… I feel so *used*!" he finally said, playing indignant. Freya let a throw pillow live up to its name, hitting him upside the head.

Before a pillow fight rightfully erupted, he sighed and stood up. "Oh… Okay, I think we should go to bed. Our beds. I mean, uh, you know. Hehe."

Freya righted herself with minimal exposure, wishing she had worn something under the robe after all, and reluctantly agreed. "Ah, yes, I suppose we should."

Zidane led her towards the door, stopped short, reached on his tiptoes and left a quick, chaste kiss on her cheek. “See you next year.”

Freya didn’t let him off that easy, and caught him for one last embrace. He didn’t fight her.

“It goes against all my good sense,” the dragoon spoke behind his ear, “But your secret’s safe with me. I won’t violate your trust.”

He twitched with a faint, grateful smile. “Thank you, Freya. I’m sorry again for putting this burden on you.”

“Don’t be ridiculous. I’ll think of something. I’m not going to just sit idle while this happens to you.”

She heard him glumly mutter into her robe, “Don’t even bother; it’s a waste of time.”

“Stop that,” she censured him, “I don’t want to hear you speak like that anymore. I’ll find a way. We’ll find a way.”

“Freya, please. You can at least spare me the false hope.”

She clenched her fists, grabbing a tangled ruff of carrion worm silk and crystal-white, outgrown hair. He winced—her claws probably scratched him

through the mess. “I said shut up! Dear gods, Zidane, you’re hopeless sometimes. I’d better see you this time next year.”

“Heh… yeah.” He gently pushed them apart, looked up to her and nodded. “See ya later.”

On those terms, Freya finally turned to leave.

“Freya.”

When she looked back, she found him standing as she left him: not as tall as he should’ve been, not as proper as he should’ve been, not as proper as he shouldn’t have been, not as happy as he should’ve been, not as young as he should’ve been, and all the worse for wear.

But he was smiling, and for a change he meant it.

“Thanks, really. For listening. You’re a good friend.”

5. Confessions

Six months later, it was announced that Queen Garnet of Alexandria was at last with child.

Freya was stepping out of the Burmecian royal palace when the town crier crossed her way, belting out the news to the clatter of a bronze handbell. She stopped in her tracks and stared into a shivering puddle at her feet before wrinkling her nose and moving on.

“I wonder how he talked her into it,” was all she said to Fratley on it, leaving her husband aghast and confused.

He didn’t think much of it when he first heard it. Lindblum is a big city, which means all the more crazy to go around.

So when Blank overheard at his favorite pub that there was one more crazy in town, he resumed his meal (soup of the day: Mushroom Surprise—the surprise was that he survived it) without an extra beat. When he heard that this guy had been sitting in

the New-Old Cathedral (if there is a God, why did He let such a stupid name go unpunished, Blank thought) for two days straight dressed up like a Burmecian monk, that was worth a piqued eyebrow.

When he heard that this guy sitting in the New-Old Cathedral for two days straight dressed up like a Burmecian monk was a young white-haired man with a tail, Blank got up and paid his tab, because that was just too damned suspicious not to check out.

There was a reason it was called the New-Old Cathedral, even if it didn't make the appellation any less stupid.
During the last war that swept the Mist Continent, the tower city of Lindblum suffered heavily. The devastation was so widespread and taxing that it took the better of three years to rebuild the city-state to its comfortable norm. Old Cathedral, a landmark harking back to the end of the nomadic hunting period of Lindblum's history, was part of the wreckage. It was voted by the citizens to restore the archaic heap of rubble to new glory, and in that spirit it was dubbed again, "New-Old."

Dirt-old buildings may fall, Blank figured, but retarded names live forever.

Blank lingered around the church's gate for a while, getting a load of the scenery. He hadn't been near the place since it was rebuilt, but he could see now that fine craft was put towards making the new bricks look old, or the old bricks look decent—it was that hard to tell. Clinging vines were already reclaiming their old niches in the masonry—come spring again, their brown, shriveled husks would be overrun by more green stalks.

Inside, it was familiar turf: dark wooden pews at attention along each side of a narrow center aisle. Dust-dyed old tapestries (probably picked off the walls of some museum to replace the ones lost) were strung like curtains between tall, slitted stained glass windows. Afternoon sunlight streamed through the translucent artwork and decked the hall in the splotchy shadows of rainbows. The high, peaked ceiling and naked floorboards built up weighty acoustics and made the place seem larger than it really was. Blank supposed a hundred people could pack into the seats on a good day, though for his ears' sake he wouldn't ever put up with such a cram.

With such luck, only three people were around: Blank, a custodian of sorts (or maybe just a broom enthusiast), and Mr. Crazy-of-the-Week. It was just as Blank had heard; he was a white-haired young

man just sitting there, not up to a damned thing. The stranger was keeping to himself in a pew near the front altar, his vapid fascination held by a decorative window on the nearest side wall—it seemed to repay him with a baptism of green light. Blank decided to approach the fellow and find out if he was really a stranger or… what.

There was no sneaking up about it; the echoed tramping of Blank's boots could be heard in the rafters. He took his usual smooth pace down the aisle, stopping at the end of the crazy's pew. The guy didn't turn in the slightest response. Blank looked him over, fixating on the furry, stark white cord snaking out the back of his purple habit and piling in a lazy loop at his side. Since Blank couldn't glimpse his face, the redheaded rogue instead wondered if the thick, unbridled alabaster spines falling around the stranger's shoulders were a wig. This person couldn't be… who was he even thinking of, exactly? The only people with builds and tails like that were Genomes, and the only Genome he'd heard of with hair like that was… but that guy was dead.

"Hey," he employed his voice, typically a last resort. He'd grown into a minimalist about conversation, preferring to speak with actions rather than words. Blank had a feeling he was going to

need a lot of both before this encounter was over, however.

It worked easily enough. The guy finally turned to address Blank. A look of surprise flashed across his face, followed by a short “hello” smile.

Blank furrowed his brow, nonplussed by the apparition. “Zidane?” What was *he* doing here, looking like… that…?

Zidane returned to his window-watching. “I never got it, personally. This religion thing. Do you believe in God?” he asked, as casually as if they were just sitting down at the bar for a drink.

Blank was ruffled by the abrupt, dismissive and invasive natures of the query. “Goddamnit, don’t ask me those kinda questions,” he complained, and the janitor in the corner shot him a hard look.

“Just asking,” Zidane said, wholly unapologetic, “People like to have something greater than themselves to believe in—something to look up to that’ll explain everything good and bad in their lives… Something that’ll explain what happens to them when they die.”

“What the hell are you talking about?” Blank was direct. He received another glare from the sidelines.

The monk-guiser stood up with aching patience, trying to thaw his idle legs out. “You’re right, I don’t want to think about this kinda stuff either. I don’t know how he ever suffered it.”

“Who?”

Zidane stretched, yawned and faced Blank again. He amiably threw up his hands and asked, “How’re you?” as if their chat had only begun.

“Are you off your nut or something?” Blank wasn’t quite ready to start over. “What are you doing? I heard that you’ve been here for days.”

He smirked, mildly put-off. “Nice to see you, too.” Staring back at his wall of interest, he answered distantly, “I was just enjoying the murals, and thinking about stuff.”

“Stuff, huh?” Blank wasn’t going to pry; he was a master of minding his own business, when appropriate. Some things stood for asking, though, like, “What’re you doing in Lindblum?”

“Oh, just visiting. I’m leaving tomorrow.”

Blank pushed up the belt shielding his eyes and scratched the ridge of his brow. “You ever gonna ‘just visit’ the hideout?” he wondered in his

typically irritable-if-good humor. “We haven’t seen your sorry hide in ages.”

Zidane’s spaced-out gaze fell off the wall and crawled along the baseboards. “…Sure.” An alert, guilty conscience dawned on him gradually, and his mind caught up with his words in a slow blink. “I’ll stop by now. Where are you going?” he asked by-the-way.

“With you, looks like.” Blank angled a shrug towards the exit. “Com’on, you can say hi to the boss.”

The redhead waited for his fellow thief to extricate himself from the narrow pew and join him, but once Zidane did he held Blank back by the shoulder. “Hey, wait a second.”

“Eh?”

Zidane’s hands disappeared into deep pockets as the Genome offered an uneasy half-grin. “What’s the rush? Wanna get a drink first?”

Blank, ever agreeable when it came to drinks, showed his old friend to a new pub in the Business District, something on the way to the aircab station. They ducked inside, escaped the winter chill gnawing on Main Street and cozied up to the bar. It

was too late for the lunch crowd and too soon for the supper one, so both could enjoy their mead in some peace.

“Hey man, what’s up?” Blank eventually asked, one mug and half a bowl of peanuts later. He had offered Zidane some earlier, but his friend merely turned a green cheek and muttered, “No, thanks.”

“Huh?” Zidane snapped out of his silent stupor and set down his mug. A second later, he recalled the question. “Oh. Nothin’.”

Blank snorted. “Yeah, I’ll say. I don’t see you around for years, and when all-of-a-sudden you *do* show up, it’s like you’re not on this planet. Why are you even here? What’re you brooding about? What’s happened?”

“Nothing,” the blonde dismissed him flatly. He spun a stray peanut on the bar like a top. “… Nothing.”

“Bullshit.” Blank picked a peanut flake from his teeth and flicked it into an ash tray. “You won’t have a problem buying our drinks, then,” he flippantly jabbed.

Zidane drummed his tail between the legs of his barstool and huffed, amused. “That’s fine. Just this

round, though, then I’m broke.”

Blank dropped an incredulous look on him. “You? Broke? That’s a laugh.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?” Zidane shrugged defensively. “You don’t think because I live like a noble that I’m rich like one, do you?”

“I’m not supposed to think that?” Blank retorted.

He shook his head and returned his focus to the spinning peanut. It skidded out across a puddle on the countertop. “I guess you can think what you want. I had to save up pretty bad to make this trip on my own, though. As long as I’m married to Dagger, the castle puts me up and feeds me, but if I want any money in my hands I have to beg Dagger for it. I don’t have a piece to my name, all told.”

“Huh.” Blank chewed the situation over. “I shoulda guessed. Makes sense, I suppose.”

“Yeah, pretty smart of ’em. I wouldn’t trust me with money, either.”

Both sniggered into their mugs.

“Hmm, yeah. Hey, I heard Dagger’s finally got a bun in the oven.” Blank landed a clapping hand on the other’s shoulder. “It’s about time, man.”

“Ha. Yeah,” Zidane agreed sulkily.

“What took you two so long? Everybody thought you’d be a regular family man by now, like that girl-general and Captain Loudmouth, and that Dragon Knight friend of yours from Burmecia.”

“Freya? Yeah, her kids are sweet. They call me Uncle Zidane. It sounds so weird, heh.”

“I’ll bet. The only titles you used to have in front of your name were ‘damn’ and ‘I’m going to kill you.’”

Zidane smiled in reminiscence. “Here’s to that.” They toasted accordingly.

“So what’re you and Dagger gonna name the little guy? Or girl, or… you know.”

“Oh. Well. That’s up to Dagger. I don’t have any call there.”

“What’re you talking about? You’re the kid’s damn father, aren’t ya? That’s call enough.”

“Actually, I’m not,” Zidane muttered into his hand.

Blank finished off his drink and coughed. “What?”

“I’m not the father,” he admitted quietly.

“How the hell… What’s that supposed to mean?”

Zidane shrugged openly. “I don’t know how I can make it any more clear.”

“Shit.” Blank spit into his empty mug and leaned closer, lowering their talk to discreet tones. “How do you know that? For sure, I mean.”

“Because I picked the surrogate myself.”

“What?” Blank pushed his visor up into his hair and squinted through the dim pub at his comrade. “Who? What does that mean? What the hell are you talking about?”

Zidane licked his lips and shook his head, his gaze floating across the bar to anything that wasn’t Blank. “I’ve probably said too much. This is supposed to be under wraps, y’know.”

“Who, man.” Blank wasn’t even asking.

“His name is Lord Barley,” he talked easily, “He’s from Treno.”

“That’s fantastic.” Blank slapped the bar in sarcastic revelry. “That’s all you know about this guy? How did he get to be the father?”

“You want the whole story?”

“Like hell if I don’t. You’re talking crazy. What’s this story?”

“I met him at one of Dagger’s fancy-pants functions. We kinda hit it off, so I introduced him to Dagger, and they got along pretty well, too. It was my idea later to ask him to father Dagger’s heir.”

“You—it was *your* idea? You paid this guy to knock up your wife?”

Zidane shrugged shiftily. “Not with money, exactly.”

“With what, then?”

“Well, it’s what the big-wigs called ‘insured inheritance.’ He basically gets to step in and take my job once—” he faltered, “If I pop off. Like I said, though, this is all behind the scenes. The cover is going to be that I’m the father and Barley will be the godfather—well, he *will* be the godfather, just the real father as well, and… Man, Blank, politics is so damn confusing. Don’t ever get into it.”

Zidane finished his drink, calm as a clam, while Blank stumbled over his tongue. “Holy, what, why, what the shit, man. Just, what the, holy shit. What

the hell? What gave you that bright idea in the first place? How did Dagger even agree to it?”

“Reluctantly,” came the deadpan answer.

“I’ll bet,” Blank huffed.

Zidane sighed, exasperated with the argument that hadn’t yet started, and spun in his seat to face Blank. “Look, it’s not like either of us were happy about this. It just had to be done. Dagger’s advisors and a bunch of power-hungry bastards thinking they could do better wouldn’t get off her back until she had a kid. And besides, who am I to stop her from having a family, Blank?”

“Hello?” Blank feinted a swat at Zidane’s ear—he would’ve followed through, once upon a time, but a direct hit felt too awkward now—it felt like he wasn’t even talking to the same Zidane—not the one he used to know, anyway. “You’re her *husband*. If you two can’t make your own babies you adopt some or just say tough shit or… damn! You don’t do something like *that*, Zidane!”

“It’s not that simple!” he nearly shrieked. “You don’t understand the pressure she was under.”

“I guess I don’t! Holy shit, man,” Blank reiterated, and turned around to lean back against the

bar.

Each mulled in the other's silence for a while, until Blank begged for clarity. "So you're cool with this? This kid's got nothing to do with you and you're fine with that?"

His companion nudged the wet peanut into languid circles, no reply forthcoming.

"Do you even *care*?"

Zidane didn't say.

At the end of his wits, Blank acidly provoked, "Just tell me this: when you married that queen, did you get your balls chopped off on the wedding night, or did they wither away slowly over the years?"

When he checked Zidane's response, all Blank got was a frosty scowl. The Genome clicked his tongue in disgust, plunked some gil onto the counter, hopped down and walked out.

Blank grumbled a sigh and slid off his barstool, following. He had to shove through the emerging supper crowd to get out the door and catch up with his friend on the street. "Hey, Zidane!" he called out.

Zidane didn't slow down, much less look back. "Get bent," was carried to Blank on the stiff breeze.

The redhead picked up his gait and caught the Genome by his heavy sleeve. “Damnit Zidane, wait a second!”

“What?” Zidane spun to a halt and glowered at him, understandably peeved. “Are you going to lecture me now? I don’t need crap from *you*, Blank. I’ve got enough problems, thanks.”

“You son of a bitch,” Blank hotly fired back, his grip tightening on Zidane’s arm when his friend twisted to escape. “I’m trying to help you!”

Zidane returned his kindness with a sneer. “Oh really? Yeah, that sounded real helpful back there! Thanks for reminding me of how much of a loser I am. I was only trying to be honest with you.”

Blank gritted his teeth, recognizing that perhaps he wasn’t the most tactful person alive, but that wasn’t the real issue here. “Where are you running to, Zidane? When are you going to run out of places to go? When are you going to quit tucking your damn tail between your legs and start dealing with shit!”

Zidane wrenched his arm free, his voice flaring with his temper. “I don’t need any help to go crawl

in a hole and die! I can handle it just fine on my own, thanks."

Blank startled, letting his arm drop. His expression squished, befuddled, and his headband comically fell back onto his nose. "What?"

Zidane shrank a couple of steps, shaking his head and sniffing contritely at the ground. He then tried walking away again. Blank sucked up his bearings, skipped ahead and blocked his way.

The Genome ducked to get around him. "Get out of my—"
Blank held him fast by the shoulders. "No, listen kid. Stop. Just stop."

He obeyed, holding still as a shrill evening gust buffeted their sides.

Blank loosed a heavy sigh and rearranged his footing, getting comfortable in this controlled reprieve. "Geez, Zidane," he breathed, "What's happened to you? Why are you being like this?"

Zidane cringed all over and trained an empty look on one of the buttons of Blank's coat. He didn't move to reply.

“Look, man,” the redhead spoke through to him anyway, “I mean what I said. I want to help you out. But I can’t if you’re just gonna pout and run away like a damn baby.”

The figure in Blank’s hands shut his eyes tightly and shuddered with a strange hiccup. “Blank…” he whimpered and leaned forward on unsteady feet, clutching the furry ruff of his friend’s coat. “Whoa,” Blank murmured when he realized he was being drawn into a hug. The redhead swallowed dryly and patted his grizzled comrade on the back, trying to jarr the outbreak of shivers and sobs.

“It’s okay, kid,” was all he knew to say, “Com’on, we’ll go see the boss. It’ll be all right.”

Blank didn’t have any more answers by the time they reached the hideout, but he wasn’t digging for them anymore. He just lent a warm shoulder and led the way, satisfied with helping Zidane “get a grip and cheer the hell up.” He seemed to have some moderate success about it; when he flashed his friend a testing grin, the Genome returned a threadbare version of the same.

They turned the corner around the Theater District, took some short steps up to a big front door and shuffled quickly around it, shutting themselves in and the cold weather out. Blank wrestled out of his coat and began to fire up some spare lamps while Zidane staggered around in a chilled, awestruck stupor.

“Like what we’ve done with the place?” the redhead queried when he caught his friend staring up into the open, cog-ridden rafters.

Open chests and stuffed suitcases were piled into corners and beneath bunk beds. Plywood nailed to shipping crates passed for tables. The place smelled like sawdust, old hay, kerosene and burnt eggs—an aroma he used to wake up to every morning until he didn’t even notice it was stuck to him anymore, and by then only the most hideous odors would faze him (“Geez, Boss, lay off the cabbage!” “Bwahahaha!”) Zidane chuckled, inspecting the shoddy carpentry and half-baked furnishings with a grin of disbelief.

It was the same. Of course it was the same. Zidane remembered his return from the Iifa Tree, now seven years ago, and his subsequent stay with his Tantalus brothers, under this very clock tower. He remembered walking through the doors and

staring dumbstruck at the born-again dump they called home.

“It’s the exact same dump it always was. I can’t believe you guys.”
‘Yeah, well… “Blank shrugged off the slow year-and-a-half it took to bring the Tantalus hideout back up to shape.” You know us. We were too lazy to think up a better way to rebuild it. We just threw it back together the best we could remember.’
Zidane shook his head and smiled knowingly. “‘If it ain’t broke, don’t fix it,’ right?”
“Damn straight.”

Zidane quested through the (ware)house for other occupants before coming around with the question, “Hey Blank, where is everyone?”

“All over,” Blank briefed him, “Cinna and Marcus went to Treno, then to Alexandria. The ’Neros went to Daguerreo, of all places. They’re running errands for the boss.”

“Oh.” Zidane let it rest; it wasn’t uncommon for Boss to order the group to split up and ‘gather the goods’ before a big gig, or “hide the goods” following one. “So, where’s the boss?”

Blank frowned, wondering the same. “Should be in. Lemme check.” He bounced up a step to a side door and knocked brazenly on it. ‘Hey, Boss!’ He was rewarded with a fit of barking and thundering from the obscured side of the door. “…Yeah, Boss is in.”

“Wuthehelleryou waking me up for?” rumbled the door.

“Because you’d sleep through the End Times if I let ya, Boss,” Blank yelled back through it, “’sides, I thought you’d want to say hi to our visitor.”

“What visitor?” Thumps, thuds and rustling grew more prominent as the hulking thing within that room made to answer the question for himself. The door flew ajar with a groan, revealing none other than the boss.

Zidane stiffened, apprehension tightening his back. It sometimes took a good look to put the fact back into perspective that Baku was a big man. Really, really tall and really big. He stood a head higher than the rest of the band, even Marcus, their muscle-guy. He had tree-trunks for legs and great ape arms and a gut that could pack in a whole turkey and still be used as a battering ram for the occasional stubborn door or stubborn oaf. He could look doubly

jolly or doubly intimidating, when the need called for either, and that was largely what made him the boss—never mind that he was the elder of the lot.

Baku, dressed in big, loose flannel, filled the doorframe and blinked hard through the candle-twilight to pick out the interruptions. His beady gaze skipped over Blank and lingered on the other, scrutinizing the pasty-haired, monk-clad young man.

The Genome grimaced at the thought that his old mentor-boss might not even recognize him, and it didn't help that Baku wasn't wearing his goggles to aid his vision.

"Who the hell're—"
"Hi Boss," Zidane swiftly cut him off, offering a meek, friendly wave to compensate for the outburst.

The boss's bearded mug drew long as the stranger's identity sank in. "Whoa, Zidane? Izzat you? Well I'll be damned!" The floorboards rattled complaints when Baku sprang out his door and landed between the two boys. "Ack," Zidane scarcely had room to breathe before he was sucked up into a bear-hug. Blank stood off to the side, counting his blessings.

Thoroughly disarmed and disheveled, Zidane was finally put back on solid ground. “Eheh, nice to see you too, Boss,” he said dizzily, and for once without irony. He was actually relieved; Baku’s hellos and goodbyes were usually served on bare knuckles.

Baku’s belly shook with a laugh. “You smell like old rich people!” was his immediate observation.

The once-blonde scratched the back of his head, vexed for a response. “Uh… thanks?”

“What’re you up to in these parts, boy?” Zidane stood up straight again when the boss cuffed his arm, his posture balancing between casual and deferential. Blank watched the exchange of body language with a quirked frown. Zidane never used to be timid in front of the boss—actually, he used to walk away with a fat lip before he’d back down and shut his trap, and the kid’s best idea of showing respect was doing what the boss ordered when it was *convenient*.
But those were the old days, Blank supposed. Zidane was never a lot of things he had just been in the past few hours; the sight he made now was weird and a little… pathetic.

“You’ve been a rare sight,” Baku chortled.

“We met up in the Business District,” Blank supplied.

Zidane let Baku take that for his answer, and then waited for his reaction. The big man swept a glance over the Genome again, and his bushy brow creased like a wave of caterpillars. “I’m going to talk with the boy in private for a minute,” he informed Blank, something strangely circumspect in the boss’s tone.

“Alright, Boss,” Blank yielded. The redhead leaned against the wall and became a piece of the scenery, while Baku steered the visitor into his room with a firm, meaty hand.

Zidane closed the door behind them and stood in place patiently, scanning the contents of the boss’s room while Baku lit a lamp on the bed table. The surroundings were adorned with patchwork fabrics and fractured souvenirs, little pieces of worthless scavenged from the troupe’s many treasure-hunting expeditions: griffin talons, cracked coins, busted spying glasses, a collection of beer bottle caps from the last century and fang… fangs. All the pretty, shiny things that couldn’t be sold or eaten ended up on Baku’s wall. It was like a nostalgic arts-and-crafts shop.

The boss spoke first. “You look more like you’re ready to say goodbye than hello. Why so down?”

“Oh, Boss, it’s…” Zidane put up a wan smile, fighting to dismiss the other’s concern. If he wasn’t worth anything anymore, he could still act worth a damn. He was practically born into the business. “Nothing much, really. I just thought I’d pay a visit. I’m a little worn down from the trip, is all.”

“Well, you’ve got some timing. Nobody’s in! Gwaha.”

“Oh well, that’s my luck these days. You’ll tell the others when they come in that I said hi, right? I’m not staying.”

“In a hurry, eh?”

“Sort of.”

“Ah. Okay. Hey, why don’t you at least stay the night? You can’t be in that much of a hurry.”

“It’s okay,” Zidane brushed the notion off, “I’ll just go. I don’t want to become a burden.”

“What the hell’re you talking about? You’ve always been a burden. Gwahaha!” Baku drummed his gut to his own punchline.

Zidane took the joke with a half-hearted chuckle, reflecting on the adage about truths spoken in jest. “Eh, eheh, right.”

Baku, sensing how uncomfortable the other was, closed the gap between them and laid a hand on the kid’s shoulder. “Hey, boy…”

“Boss…” Zidane fidgeted at the touch, but eventually relaxed when the hand slid around the back of his neck and tangled in his hair. He imagined the boss’s excuse: he couldn’t see well without his goggles, and it was better in that case to get a tactile sense of whom he was talking to. Perhaps it was really a case of morbid curiosity, the boss wanting to feel as well as see the wear-and-tear his youngest boy brought back to his doorstep.

Zidane wouldn’t gripe at that; he was a touchy creature, himself, oftentimes too fond of human contact for his own good. He closed his eyes and drank in the lost, familiar scent of grease, mothballs, leather and mildew. He thought back to strange, simpler times when there were no set rules and nobody could claim a bed to themselves and if you wanted spare change you had to lift it from the unsuspecting’s purse—he thought back to road trips and big schemes from little men, Cinna’s charred

scrambled eggs and a stockroom filled with extra props where the guys worked out their differences like real men, no diplomacy quite like a fist to the gut—he remembered the dream of the “big score” someday, someday it would be better, life would be better for everyone if we just hit the right job ain’t that right…?

He remembered the smallest times, when he could fit wholesale across the boss’s stomach, the best bed in the house if it would quit snoring like a saw, and a hand big enough to wrap around and crush his middle would stroke him head-to-tail like a cat, listening for the cat’s reward (“Bwaha, you’ve got a little motor in ya.”)

And Zidane could’ve wept for all the peace and chaos he left behind. “…I miss you guys.”

Baku hummed. “We miss you too, boy.”

“I’d join the band again if I could.”

The big guy shook his head. “Don’t say that. You’ve got a good lot, that woman an’ all. Don’t start takin’ it for granted.”

He remembered his last night as a bachelor, a rowdy party drowned in booze and teasing skirts, the guys—his brothers—taking laughing jabs at him

“one last time” before he was “shackled down,” and he’d grin and bear the joke. It was funny, after all. It was fun. He remembered tripping over cobblestones all the way back to the hideout, their raucous mirth keeping even the rats and the moons awake. He remembered tumbling head-over into Blank’s bunk, where the two quarreled in slurs before their tussle collapsed into shrugs, their dispute forgotten in favor of rest and hangover.

He remembered his old friend leaning over him, the breath grazing his cheek sticky with drink.

“I luv you, kid. I wan’wuz best fer you.”

‘Mmm? I love you too, bro.’

“You—yu’ll… won’t forget, right?”

“Huh? You’re drunk, bro, like… drunk like water.”

*‘Drunk like a **fox**.’*

“Hehe, what?”

“Wha? No, I mean, us. Don’t forget about us. We’re your brothers, kid, like… once a Tantalus, always a Tantalus.”

‘What’re you going on about? You sure talk some shit when you’re wasted.’

“Haha… wut? Ah, like yur any bett’r off. No! Fer serious. Don’t… forget.”

“I won’t. Now get the hell offa me; I can’t breathe, you big fish.”

Zidane ceded the point, swallowing the irony trickling up his throat like bile. “I know, Boss. I know. I’m real lucky.”

“Listen, er…” Baku rubbed his bulbous nose, stalling while his point made itself coherent. “Well, if I didn’t ever tell ya before, I just wanna say that, uh… I’m proud a’ya. You hear?”

Zidane blinked, shocked by the admission. The boss had never told him that—not when he finally won the right to leave Tantalus, man-to man; not when he’d made his grand return from the Iifa Tree, and not even on his wedding day. The words sounded fairly alien coming from Baku, as if he hadn’t used them before because he was saving them for a momentous occasion.

The Genome grinned soberly, appreciating the timing. “Yeah.” He swallowed, grudgingly pulled away and slipped out the door.

“…Thanks, Boss. For everything.”

The air was crisp and still as with sleep, for a pleasant change. The moons were showing up, high

and mighty over the streets of the great mechanical city. It was a good omen for a long journey.

“Hey.”

Zidane turned on his way out and, for the first time that day, looked Blank dead in the eye. The kid looked so… old. Blank cleared his throat.

“You leavin’?”

It hanged in the air like a suggestion. The kid turned away, steadied the rucksack across his back and picked a street lamp to stare at.

“Did you ever meet Alex?” It wasn’t the kind of question Zidane asked because he didn’t know the answer.

Blank was irked by the relevance of it all, but he answered anyway. “Uh… I think so. It was a long time ago. You know ’im?”

Another obvious question. The kid chuckled softly. “You might say that.”

The silence should have been uncomfortable, but Blank wasn’t the sentimental type, particularly concerning goodbyes. A quiet study was his most natural farewell. Yet, why a sense of permanence clung to this parture, Blank didn’t know. It was as if

the boy were walking off to the gallows—a ridiculous thought, of course, but the mood was such.

“Hey, kid…”

“I’m not a kid.” It was terse.

Blank’s eyebrow twitched beneath his headband. He had always amicably called him “the kid,” just like Boss always called him “the boy,” and the pet-names were playfully contended. Blank was trying to be casual—familiar. The kid was trying to be serious. It was ironic, but Blank respected it. The man who stood at the foot of the steps was not, somehow, the guy he grew up with as a child, and the Tantalus-brought was finally coming to terms with that.

“You’ve grown up,” Blank said gruffly, almost to himself.

“Huh,” Zidane gave a short, cynical laugh, and then fell pensive once more. “I think the boss agrees.”

Blank didn’t know how to speak for the boss, so he didn’t.

The kid shrugged deeper into his robes and plopped down on the steps, sighing heavily. “I’m so tired, Blank.” He wiped his wrist under his nose and Blank thought he heard a sob, but the night was too thick to draw any conclusions. “…but I can’t rest just yet.”

What was he talking about?

“I, um,” Zidane began again, his gaze falling through the cracks in the sidewalk, “Guess I better get going.”

“Yeah.” Blank nodded dumbly.

He stood up and started onto the road. “See you when I see you.”

Where had Blank heard that before? Plenty of times, he supposed; it was a common expression, yet the deja vu lingered.

Then he remembered, and his response… “How ’bout never?”

Yeah, that was it. It could have meant something, but Blank wasn’t the sentimental type, after all. Real men didn’t waste time with those kinds of feelings. Real bandits couldn’t afford to. The kid was too far gone to hear him try, anyway. Maybe Blank should

have stopped him, but he couldn’t fabricate a reason for it, and the kid knew what he was doing—well, he always thought he knew what was best for himself, and the boss usually proved him wrong, but if the kid wanted to be a man he would have to make his mistakes on his own. Blank wasn’t about to bail him out the way he always used to.

Instead, he offered some low, faint words that would never reach him.

“Goodbye, kid.”

6. Confrontations

A/N: Oops! Thanks, GN.

Lady Freya,

I understand from your letter that you're seeking a way to prolong the lifespan of the first-generation Genome. I regretfully write to assure you that this cannot be done. The possibility of suspending the genetic inhibitor on our life cycle was simply theoretical, especially as far as the common Genome was concerned. Garland never put it into practice, and he only offered to do so once.

As you might recall, Zidane refused.

All knowledge of the application died with Garland, and then with Terra.

I think it is in both Zidane's and your best interest to let this issue rest and nature take its course. If you insist on helping him, I recommend medicines to relieve pain, as Zidane lacks the self-restorative magic Kuja used to repress his symptoms (I wonder if Kuja used that same magic to delude himself into

visions of immortality. Such would explain his ambitious course in life.)

Please take care,

Mikoto

P.S: If you see him before it's too late, tell him that the children and I are fine.

It was weird, Zidane realized suddenly (and then he realized that he suddenly realized this frequently, and perhaps he ought to be used to this fact by now, at least enough to quit stopping in the middle of nowhere to have the same epiphany over and over, and… he lost his train of thought around there) to stand on the plains outside Treno's walls without a single cause to draw his daggers. Having grown up in a world fraught with mist-monsters, it was sometimes disconcerting to wander the present countryside without meeting one.

That was the natural consequence of dispatching the Mist, of course: no more mist-monsters. One would think people would be unanimously happy to be able to travel on foot between the nations, finally free of life-leeching critters, but Zidane learned-not

for the first time-that there was no justice in the world when the Alexandrian Monster Hunter's Union came knocking down the castle doors, demanding recompense through gnashing teeth (Dagger tactfully ignored his advice to stick their picket-signs where nobody wanted to fetch them back.)

Bringing his beloved to mind in even that slight way punched another dent in his spirit, and he had to reinforce his footing and clear his breath with a deep sigh before pressing on. Treno was behind him, now, everything worth seeing checked under, "Been there, done that. Again."

His next stop was—

"Why the hell are you dressed like a rat." The outburst, much like its speaker, sounded like too much of a tough guy to ask questions.

Zidane turned around slowly, on guard, though once his eyes confirmed through the midnight's black-and-blues what his ears had picked up, he relaxed his grip on the dagger at his belt.

"Whoa, Amarant. Didn't see ya there." The Genome's tail agitated the clumps of dried grass and

snow at his feet, picking up a curious beat. “This is quite a surprise. What’s up?” he asked pleasantly.

Standing still in his battle-worn half-slouch, his long face hard and jaded, his eyes shadowed by his grizzly, blood-red dreadlocks, and his giant figure stark against the expanse of frozen weeds, Amarant looked the part of a one-man army sent by a resentful hell to fill the shoes of every monster wiped off the face of the continent. He would’ve been an unnerving encounter if Zidane didn’t know him better.

“Answer my question,” he demanded, his demeanor ever-uncompromising.

“Huh?” Zidane spent a moment puzzling over that before glancing his attire over. “Oh. You mean these clothes? Hey, how did you know they were Burmecian?”

Amazingly, without a struggle, he explained himself. “Once upon a time, when I was an idiot kid, one of those rat-monks crossed my path. I looked at him the wrong way or he looked at me the wrong way, it doesn’t matter. We fought. I lost. I wanted to understand why.”

“So let me guess,” Zidane piped in, “You followed him? Gee, didn’t see that one coming.”

“Go to hell.”

“Fair enough.”

The stoic bounty hunter spent another moment coagulating his next sentence, as if forming words took as much effort as coughing up a snot-wad. Actually, for Amarant, the latter was probably easier, and the results tended to sound the same either way. “I wanted to know how he beat me. He taught me his secrets. He said he honed his skills through meditation-finding ‘inner peace’ and all that rot. He made me get up at dawn every morning and stand on one foot like a big stupid statue, just me and my thoughts. He said I was supposed to concentrate on finding my ‘inner beast’ or whatever it’s called.”

“Did you find it?”

“Yeah, I found how to die from boredom. I hated that training. I hate standing still for hours like that. I can’t stand being in one place. The more I stood around, the more I thought about all the shit that wasn’t getting done, and the more pissed off I got.” He rolled his shoulders broodingly. “…But I didn’t

stop. Even when that rat wasn't around anymore, I kept getting up in the morning and doing meditations. I kept doing it even after I grew stronger than that old monk-rat. I still do it." He lifted his huge blue hands in the clear moonlight, scrutinizing them for some profound truth about himself. "And now I guess I'm a monk, too."

"Huh." Zidane crossed his arms and cocked his head, contemplating the significance of it all. "That's some story. I didn't even have to pry it out of you."

"Shut up," was his surly rebuff, "I don't owe you a damn thing."

"What are you doing out here?" Zidane took his turn at questions.

"You're dying."

Zidane's jaw dropped, disarmed by the statement. Not only did Amarant somehow *know*, but he had the nerve to just out and say it like, like *that*, blunt and simple… That was the way Amarant worked, though. Still, it rattled the Genome to hear it from someone else, out loud. He was acclimated to the silence of it-the sickening mantra whispered through aches and pains-that thing he couldn't bring himself

to utter. He could think it, and even write it out, but his ears couldn't stand such disloyalty from his lips.

Amarant had said it for him, though, and now it was time to confront it. He levelled the sinking feeling in his gut with a firm blink and asked, "How did you…?"

On cue, Amarant flashed a white strip of paper from his travel pack: a folded letter. Zidane recognized it with a start, and reflexively sifted through his own bag. "Oh damn," he muttered into the empty space the letter once occupied, 'Look at that, you picked my pocket.' Zidane straightened and scratched his ear, laughing at himself. "I *really* must be losing my touch, eheh."

"You didn't answer my question," Amarant steered back to his point.

"You didn't phrase it like one," Zidane threw him off, "But yes, it's true. I guess you read my letter, there."

Amarant turned the paper over in his hand, considering its contents again. "Huh."

"What?"

"I didn't bet you'd have dropped off so soon."

“Sorry to ruin your wager,” Zidane played into the poor humor, somehow not bitter in the least. He was at last beginning to feel comfortable in this conversation.

“Why?”

“Do you seriously want to know?”

He chewed it over, either honestly considering the negative or finding a way to answer yes while still seeming cool and distant. Amarant wore an apathetic front like a coat of armor, but both knew curiosity was his second nature. “Might as well.”

“Don’t worry, it’s just a Genome thing,” Zidane said, knowing well enough that Amarant didn’t need the reassurance. It felt more like a formality than consolation. “Turns out Kuja wasn’t the only one with a cap put on his life.”

“Garland screwed you too, huh?”

“Actually, everyone born-tsh,” he corrected himself with a distasteful cluck, “-made, whatever, in Bran Bal. ‘First-generations,’ we’re called. We only get about twenty-five years, then we’re toast. Something to do population control or, uh… Mikoto explains it better than I can.”

“Hmm. That sucks.” That was the closest to an expression of sympathy Zidane had ever heard from him.

“Yeah, that… sucks.” He couldn’t really say it any better.

“So what are you doing out here? Wasn’t cozy enough with your queen?”

Zidane shrugged indignantly. “What’s that supposed to mean? What are you, jealous?”

“Of you? Give me a break.”

“No,” he turned sincere, “I just… couldn’t stay.”

“You’re running away, then. Coward.”

“I don’t need you to judge me.”

“You’ve got that right.”

Zidane kicked a lump of snow with his heel and stewed quietly in his conscience and pride, two humors never mixed well.

“You know,” Amarant spoke again after a considerate pause, graciously changing the subject, “I always thought that loudmouth captain was going to keel over first. Scream red until his head pops off

and his heart blows out of his chest like grapeshot, or something. I put my money on him, anyway."

"Money?" The Genome shook his head, getting the literal grip of what his comrade was saying. "Wait, what? You seriously bet on which one of all of us is going to last the longest?"

Amarant gave a noncommittal shrug.

"Wow, that's…" Zidane bit his lip. That's *pretty low*, or many other ways deplorable, but he couldn't bother to be offended on any account other than, "You didn't let me in on it?"

"You guys don't let me in on that bet about me showin' up for your stupid reunions."

"Yeah, but that's… Okay, touché."

"How much do I owe Freya by now, anyway?"

"I'm not sure… About eighty gil, I guess."

"Stupid rat."

"So…"

"So."

"Did you follow me out here?"

“I thought I saw you in a pub in town. I checked your bag. You let your guard down too much.”

“Apparently so. Not that I care anymore. I got nothin’ worth snatching, and if I did, it won’t mean anything to me soon enough.”

“You’ve become quite the fatalist.” He thought he could *hear* Amarant grin, as if the bounty hunter took pleasure in pinning down Zidane’s faults.

“I guess dying puts that kind of spin on things.”

“Hrmph. You really are just a selfish loner.” He sounded more disgusted, now.

“Maybe,” Zidane admitted, stricken with a fit of humility, “…maybe.” He then brightened. “Hey, Amarant. Can I ask you a question?”

Amarant snorted. “This sounds familiar.”

“Have you ever been in love?”

“What’s with you and your stupid questions?”

Zidane laughed it off. “Yeah, that was a pretty dumb one.”

“I’ll say.”

“…Do you have any regrets?”

“Better,” the big monk approved, “But still none of your business.”

“Sorry, just asking.”

“Anyone who says they don’t have regrets is either a liar or damn forgetful.”

“So which one are you?” the Genome quipped.

“Very funny, monkey.”

Zidane relented and turned his gaze aside, into the great basin opposite Treno’s mountains. “I guess you’re right. It’s none of my business.”

Amarant smirked and, after a minute of reading the Genome’s innocent intentions, supplied, “I never really stopped and thought about it. I just did what I had to do to survive. Always have. If that meant others didn’t, that was tough shit. Wasn’t any time to second-guess myself.”

“But now?” Zidane turned an eye back, still interested.

“What about now?” he growled, taking the query as a challenge, some affront to his intelligence or dignity or who-knows-what. After a minute, Amarant cooled off and indulged him, anyway. “…I guess it’s different, now. Too much time to think. I

told you, I don’t like it. Don’t get me wrong; I’m not proud of all the people I’ve had to take out, but I don’t regret it, either. You’ve got to be stronger than the guy that’s trying to off you to survive. That’s just life.”

“…Oh.” Zidane reflected on the sage brutality of the bounty hunter’s words, finding their message alarmingly familiar.
He remembered the last time he and Amarant spoke, back in Alexandria Castle, and…

He understood something. A rich, morbid chuckle bubbled out of his control. “…Heh, eheheh, ahahahaha.”

Amarant visibly tensed, put on edge by the calm hysteria. “What the hell’s so funny?”

“Being strong,” Zidane laughed, relishing the chance to quote the monk back. “It’s because I’m your friend, right?”

The bounty hunter puffed up as if he were caught at some humiliating crime. He deflated only to snarl back, “Please, bitch.”

“Hehehe, I didn’t think you cared so much.”

“Shut up.”

“Maybe next we’ll go back to your place and have a spot o’ tea, talk about the weather, play cards like old chums—”

“God I hate you.” Amarant pointedly turned his back.

“Ahahaha-okay, okay, I’ll stop.” Zidane sighed a gratified note. “I think I get it, now.”

“You don’t get anything. You’re just a has-been bookworm.” Amarant’s friendly invective was tireless.

“Ah, well… probably, true. I guess I am,” the Genome said soberly.

“What about you?” Amarant came back.

“Me?”

“No, the spider behind you,” he sneered and held up the snitched paper again. “I don’t buy any of the crap in this letter. I want to hear it from you.”

“Oh.” Zidane looked at the ground and rubbed his chin. “I… still haven’t figured mine out.”

“You’re full of shit.”

“What do you want me to say, ‘I wish I wasn’t even born’? I don’t know. I don’t know what I’d change if I could go back, much less where to begin. Not everything in my life was peachy, but, if anything were different… I wouldn’t be who I am. I can’t take that back. I can’t regret being myself.”

“So that’s how you’re going out, huh?” Zidane couldn’t read a smile nor frown behind the question, that time.

“You still think I’m a coward?”

“It’s not my place to judge you.”

They were quiet. It seemed like they’d circled back to the beginning, everything resolved but nothing gained. A strange feeling of contentment washed over him, and Zidane smiled softly.

He finally felt ready to let go.

“…Go ahead and keep it.”

“What?”

“My letter. Do whatever you want with it. It’s about to be out of my hands anyway.”

“I could just burn it,” Amarant tested him.

“You could. Will you?”

“…I’ll see you around,” he answered, everything he needed to say already out. Amarant picked up his heavy feet and walked away, back towards the dark life of Treno. “I’m not up for any of this goodbye crap.”

Zidane looked after him, wondering… “Hey, Amarant.”

The monk paused, yet didn’t turn back. “What?”

“Why did you become a monk, if you knew you wouldn’t like it?”

Amarant chewed on it for a moment before throwing the question back. “Why did you marry a queen, if you knew you wouldn’t like it?”

Stunned by the retort, Zidane watched dumbly as Amarant stalked off into the night. The Genome pursed his lips and rubbed his nose, put-out for a reply that would come too late, anyway.

At length, he shook his head, chuckled quietly, shouldered his rucksack and moved on.

“That guy will never change.”

The scruffy plains outside Burmecia were winter-green and freezing-wet. The dragon-blessed (or cursed, depending on your outlook) rain had soaked through the hood of his habit and mud had bogged down his boots.

For a legendary period, when the Mist was first dispelled, Burmecia had no rain. Then the Mist returned and the rain came back. Then the Mist went away again and the rain decided not to bugger off after all, it being fine right where it was thanks very much. Roads to the soaked kingdom were a joke, miles of puddles sewn into the landscape, harder in fact to trudge through than the encompassing grasslands. Wagons didn't even bother, and most commerce was done on the backs of chocobos or the holds of airships.

It was a very bad idea, Zidane realized in hindsight, to *walk* to Burmecia. *Scenic route, his ass.* How he'd neglected memories of hefting a child-mage on his shoulders the whole, mucky way, he could only chalk up to temporary insanity. Of course, these days the insanity liked to stick around for longer and longer increments, and it was unsettling to have to question every decision he made.

He preferred Steiner’s time-tested explanation, really: he was just an idiot.

Now he was an idiot caked in grime, soaked in cold rain and starved out of his mind, his own fault on all three counts. He’d been subsisting on pub scraps and booze for the past four days, but on the other hand it wasn’t his fault he’d lost his appetite weeks before. And then he didn’t remember the route from the grotto being so far and geez his clothes and his pack and his legs and *his skin* felt heavy it was like carrying six Black Mages how was he going to ever… oh.
The point was, he’d make it to Burmecia if it killed him. He promised he’d visit sometime.

If it killed him… haha.

If his feet hadn’t gone numb with cold he would have noticed sooner when his progress inched to a stop. He discovered to his compounding misery that he couldn’t go a step farther, and he threw a sigh up to the heavens that collapsed into a hoarse gasp. As he tasted the eternal downpour a shiver tunneled through his bones and knotted in his chest. A merciless twinge threw him to his knees, and his next breath was peppered with dirt soup. He writhed and trembled in the mire, unable to tell his cold

sweat from the cold rain, the world fading like dizzy and the mud cutting his fingers like ice and every vital pulse in his body grinding to a wretched halt while his heart was touched with freezer burn *shit please not now, not here like this I don't have time for it I have to get up, please*

Just cramps, just stupid cramps he got them all the time this would pass, he would get right back up and, and *why didn't he bring more potions, he really could use one now, cripes this is the worst pain yet*

He picked himself up on flailing, shaky limbs and then fell back down, over and over, until the trail was his bed-*you've made your bed, now lie in it, boy*-and he sobbed for the simplest wants-for a warm, dry place because this place *was so damn cold*

"Don't you ever get sick of all this rain?"
'It is the dragon gods' gift to our people.'
"That's great, but what do YOU think of it?"
"It makes me feel… warm. Do you not think warmly of your home?"

He couldn't move, and his sluggish, waterlogged mind was beginning to lose its capacity to care. He could drown and freeze in this puddle and it would be all right, all right for everyone, all right for him,

all right for the world, better off without another idiot.

…I wanna go home…

Through the darkness fringing his vision a dripping shadow landed on him, something with big feet that nudged his side and big arms that scooped him up and threw him over a big shoulder that pummeled his midriff as this big sasquatch thing took off in a jog, carrying him away-great, he can't even be spared the dignity of being left alone in the mud, a monster has to drag him off and snack on him-*well joke's on you, buddy, there's not much meat left to snack on.*

…mist-monsters don't exist anymore, do they…?

Exhausted beyond hope, Zidane blacked out.

7. Goodbyes

A/N: Thanks to DK for helpin’.

He woke up with a pungent, sticky, sour-minty-sweet taste in his mouth. A potion was something one’s tongue never forgot, even if the last ailment that called for one healed over decades before.
His mind spun around old battles, fresh scars and icy burns, while the potion’s simmering warmth nested in the pit of his stomach, gnawing in vain at the throbbing, aching cold encroaching from all his corners. His extremities were paralyzed with chill, but now in a detached sense rather than a mordant one. His toes and fingertips could have been amputated and he wouldn’t have batted an eye. Maybe they actually were, and he hadn’t noticed yet.

At least he was dry. He was wrapped in his favorite silk, and cool cotton spread around him in a muss of sheets, blankets and pillows. Hazy hearing picked up the static of rainfall, its melody trickling in from an open window. He was indoors?

He opened his eyes, midday twilight pouring in and rousing every sore muscle in his body. He tugged on a sharp breath, only to discover it wouldn’t fill him—it was hard to breathe, and every overt movement hurt too much to be worth it.

The bleary grey world came into focus. Old wooden boards stretched across the ceiling and down the walls. A box window was over the head of his bed, its heavy flap turned out and catching the water washing off the roof; tiny streams cascaded off its edges like a curtain of crystal lace. A half-spent candle kept an empty bottle on the nightstand company.

A Burmecian woman sat in a skeletal chair at his side, and her child rested his chin on the foot of the bed. Alerted by his squirming, the mother sprang up and leaned over him, her ears tuned high and her fine white hair spilling around soft green eyes.

“Zidane? Are you all right? Say something,” she entreated, her familiar voice bittersweet to his ears.

“Freya…?” he croaked, triggering a sloppy cough. His throat felt ragged.

She closed her eyes, her slender figure wilting with relief. “Thank the gods, you’re awake.”

The little boy wiggled closer, eyes and ears wide open and considerate. “Hi Uncle Zidane.”

Zidane struggled to wet his gullet and put up a friendly response. “…Oh… hi kiddo. You’re gettin’ tall. What’s up?”

“You’re in my bed,” the boy said with an informative air, as if he were a tour guide.

Freya, misinterpreting him, dressed the boy down. “Brit, shush. Uncle Zidane is our guest. Why don’t you go and look for your father and sister?”

“Mmmkay mommy.” Brit sprinted out the door and down the stairs in childish haste, thus dismissed.

Freya turned back to him, her cheeks bunched up against a long frown. “How are you feeling?”

Zidane wasted a minute trying to condense his answer into something less than an essay. “…Like I was punched in the kidneys. What happened? How did I get here?”

Freya laughed, a short, scoffing noise. “Believe it or not, Amarant brought you here.”

“Amarant…?” *He was the monster. He followed me out that far? Why?* “Where is he now?”

She shook her head. “I don’t know. After he dropped you off, he left.” She peered into herself with a sidelong glance. “Which is much more believable of him.”

“Oh.” He wouldn’t expect Amarant to stick around, anyway. It wasn’t his way. The gesture was enough. “Where is this? This your house?”

Freya nodded. She then smoothed her hair away from her face and began in a high-strung, maternal rebuke, “Have you lost your mind, Zidane Tribal? You had me worried sick. Why did you try to reach here on foot? It’s the gods’ cold out there. You could have caught your death of exposure. Why did you even leave Alexandria? What were you thinking?”

“Oh, I had to…” Man, he was so tired. Just talking was wearing him out. “You know, make the rounds. I wanted to see everyone—and everywhere, you know? Before it was too late.”

Knowing entirely what he meant, she couldn’t help but spot the fallacies. “You should have done this sooner, then, so you could make it back to Alexandria.”

“Ah, well… you know what happens to the best laid plans, Freya. I just got hung up, my bad,” he

casually excused himself.

“No, you don’t want to go back,” she called his motive.

He shied his gaze away, his silence betraying the guilty truth.

Freya closed her hand around his wrist, pulling him back to attention. “Why, Zidane?”

“How much do you love Fratley?” he blurt out, “Do you love him enough to watch him cry over you? Or do you love him too much to?”

Freya gulped, struck by the personal example.

Zidane closed his eyes before they revealed too much, too close to the point. “No, I… I can’t let her. I don’t want Dagger to see me like this. I wouldn’t be able to stand the look on her face. I’m not worth it, you know? I’m not worth her tears. It’s better for her if I just disappear.”

Freya couldn’t buy it. “Don’t talk like that. Stop being ridiculous. Is that what you call love? Abandoning the one you care about most when times get rough?”

He squared up on his elbows with a wince, narrowed a look at her and said directly, “It’s not

that simple—”

“Like hell it isn’t—” Their talk was reaching a desperate pitch.

“Freya, I’m *dying*. Simple enough?”

Freya sat back down. Zidane sank into his pillow, panting and wheezing. He didn’t have the energy to argue any more, which was fair enough, since his companion had been stumped into silence. He blinked back weary tears and met her eyes, set deep in melancholy. He felt like a jerk, enough to apologize, even though he wasn’t sure for what.

Any brewing “sorry” was bitten back when a cruel, invisible lash cut through his middle, stealing his breath. He hissed, every joint steeling against the pain. “Ah, ah-!”

His friend hovered closely again, distressed. “What’s wrong?”

Zidane muttered through gritted teeth, “Shit. Stupid cramps.” He tried to lie still, not teasing the affliction with sudden jerks, but a pinching spasm rolled him onto his side. He complained between whimpers, “God, this is agony. I want to hurry up and get it over with so this’ll stop.…Augh, how did Kuja stand it…? I bet he cheated with magic. I wish

I knew that kinda ma—” He gagged on another stroke, flopped onto his back again and curled into a howl. “AaaaahhGeeeeeeez.”

Freya, having seen enough, snapped up and flew downstairs. “Hold on, I’ll fetch some more potion.”

She hit the ground floor, crossed her kitchen and fumbled through the medicine cabinet, overturning packs of herbs and sundry antiseptics before scraping up the more precious vials of potions and ethers, things held over from an age of war that sometimes felt not long enough ago. Freya piled a few into a pouch drawn from her rumpled shirt and scurried back to Brit’s room.

She broke out some flustered squawk when she found her guest flailing his way out of bed. Zidane was making some shaky progress towards the door until he tripped over the sheet clinging to his ankles. Freya stooped to catch him, the bottles of potion spilling out of her lap and clattering to the floor.

“What are you doing?” she had to ask, trying to hold him up against his falling and thrashing. His breath stuttered and his eyes were glazed with dizzy and he trembled with fight and flight at once, a mad canary throwing itself at its cage.

“Lemme—I wanna—stop it—go—”

“Zidane!” She shook him a little harder than she meant to, but he finally slowed to a limp, the cloud of panic passing.
He swallowed thickly and remarked, rather diffidently, “I thought ‘blinding pain’ was just a figure of speech…”

Freya, flushed with relief and pity, squeezed him in a hug. “You poor fool.”

He sniffled on her shoulder. “I don’t want want to die in your house.”

At her aghast look, he amended, “I don’t mean like that—you have a nice house, really—I just don’t want—I don’t want to do this to you. I just want to go—somewhere out of everyone’s hair. I can’t make you responsible for—it’s not fair. Please let me go. I’ll get out of your way. It’ll be easier for everyone if I just disappear.”

Freya, hearing that for the last time, drove her point home with force. She slapped him. “You’re a damn fool.” And kissed the top of his head; it was a neat, solid peck that held fast to his hair and did nothing to erase the stunned look that had befallen him.

Zidane was placed back in bed and remained thereafter, suitably cowed.

A bottle of hi-potion later, Freya's charge was serenely numb, though he never shook the creeping, frosty feeling that continued to burrow through his ribs.

"You know…" he kept talking at his companion's urging, though the words were getting slippery and tangled with his thoughts, and his lungs were starting to fail him. Freya sat in vigil, listening to his rambling and prodding him when he trailed off, stoking him as she would a fading fire. Occasionally she would sniff and shut out the mist in the corners of her eyes, donning a soldier's front. He wasn't going to see the tense, bottled trembling in her breast and the tears in the backs of her eyes. She was going to hold out for the inevitable. She was going to be his friend, right here, where he needed a friend most.

"i tried so hard to fit in that castle, be a part of it all, help Dagger do her queen-things… i couldn't. she wouldn't even let me, said i wasn't 'schooled in diplomacy' and that it'd just bore me to death

anyway.…haha, i guess she was right. guy like me just doesn't belong in a place like that."

"Zidane…"

"no, i, i'll always love Dagger, i know she loves me too, but… goddamn, Freya, she lives in another world. i can't even protect her anymore; she's got her knights and general. i was such a third wheel."

"No, never. Dagger would never let you think that's true."

"well, maybe that's why i left."

Freya glanced out the window at the dimming rain clouds. The afternoon was wearing on. Her patient rattled with a low, lost chuckle.

"heh, i'm losing everything… and leaving behind absolutely nothing. shouldn't i feel sad?"

"That's not true. We won't forget. We'll all remember you."

"memories…" he lingered on the term. "it's okay, i don't feel upset over it at all. i don't know why. i feel really… at peace. that sounds hokey, doesn't it?"

"No, I'm… glad to hear that."

“i’d been thinking again, about what you said… if there’s a difference between loving someone and loving the idea of it. i think it’s true.”

“What do you mean?”

“i don’t think… i don’t think we can…” His eyes clouded and lost focus.

Freya squeezed his arm. “We can what?”

He sucked in a startled, raspy breath and resumed, “it’s… i don’t think we can really love someone until we give up the idea. i don’t think you can find what you’re looking for until you stop looking for it. then, when you’ve got nothing left to lose… there it is.”

Zidane cringed all over and she watched helplessly. She cursed herself and rigid, callous fate, stripping her of the power to stop this. It’s just like—he’s just like—just like the Black Mages. Just… *stopping*.

“…funny… you know who i’m thinking of now?”

Freya gulped. “Whom?”

Just like *him*. “vivi. he was right. genomes are more like black mages than I ever thought. and i

guess my number’s up.” He snorted at his little morbid pun, and then mellowed. “i never got to… say goodbye, y’know? before he… stopped. i had just… i had escaped from iifa, and the black mages t-took me in… they said he stopped the night before i came around. i just… it’s funny. if i had woken up a few hours sooner, i woulda had the chance to tell ’im goodbye myself.”

“That’s such a shame,” Freya remarked sadly.

“you think so? i dunno. it makes me happy.”

Her left ear ticked. “Happy?”

“yeah. they said he was right there beside me the whole time… i didn’t even realize. freya. vivi was a really good friend.”

Freya nodded and stroked his shoulder reassuringly. Even through the carrion worm silk she’d carefully dried, Zidane’s skin felt like damp ice. “Yes. Yes he was. Vivi was a good friend to all of us.”

“freya?”

“Yes?”

“i’m cold.”

“I know. I’m sorry.”

“freya…?”

“Yes?”

“do you love me?”

She had to wonder how much of his delirium was attributed to the hi-potion, and how much was… She blinked hard again. *A Dragon Knight will NOT cry at her comrade’s vigil.* “As my dearest friend.”

He smiled weakly, pleased with the reply. “…i’m not afraid anymore.”

All feeling drained from him with a quiet sigh. Freya nearly dropped to the floor before reaching him, gathering his bony frame into her arms and holding on tight. A single, desperate sob brushed his neck.

Freya felt overwhelmingly humbled by the scene —so submissive, so complacent, such a childlike surrender, such a meek voice, such a frail creature hiding in a bundle of robes and a drooping hood and shivering with cold or death or fear of death, she couldn’t quite tell…

She realized, then, that she had missed something —something tragic and important.

She wasn't there when he stopped. She was in Burmecia, busy. Working, regrouping, rebuilding, oblivious.

But now he's come to her.

And she gets to watch him stop all over again, for the first time.

His last breath was wasted on ridiculous anticlimax—typically, selfishly, stupidly, lovably *Zidane*.

"you're not gonna wanna hear this… heh… but alex thought you were pretty hot."

Freya deftly hopped backwards off the roof of her house, surveyed her solemn handiwork, wiped the last tear from her salty muzzle and walked away.

She walked fast and far, through and around town, her feet as restless as her heart. Her pacing was broken when she bumped into her husband on a narrow street. He was sporting the decorated armor and pike of a palace sentry, and was probably on his way home from duty. Freya realized with a leaden pang that he didn't even know they had a houseguest today.

“Freya!” Fratley exclaimed, concern mixed in his tone once he noticed that she was armed and dressed for travel. “Good day seeing you here, my love. What are you doing? Where are you headed?”

She was grateful (not for the first time, either) for the way the dipping nose of her headgear concealed her eyes. “Fratley?” she addressed him neutrally.

“Yes?”

“Is there a difference between loving someone and loving the idea of love?”

Fratley tipped his hat, showing his lifted brow. “The idea of love?”

“Yes, I mean… Can you be in love with being in love, without actually being in love? Or is there not a difference?”

Fratley wrinkled his nose and then answered in the next beat, as sure as if he were quoting a text, “No, there can’t be. Love is love, and that is all. Love is the purest thing there is. It’s all one ever needs.”

Freya stared at the cobbles, her stance unreadable. “…It must be enough.”

“What?” Fratley pried, “Why do you ask? Has something happened? What’s wrong, my love?”

She shifted her halberd across her back and picked up her feet again, marching past Fratley. “… Nothing.”

He turned after her, bemused. “Where are you going?”

“To make the rounds,” she replied, her stride unrelenting.

“You’ll be back soon?”

Rain filled the growing gap between the couple. Neither Freya’s glance nor voice breached it.

“Freya!”

She paused at the corner of a broader avenue, a misty halo on her fiery coat and helmet where the rain kissed her. “It’s okay,” she spoke up, her words bathing the alley in calm echoes, “You loved me too much to look back. I won’t look back, either.”

“What?” Fratley yelped, his concern rapidly sinking into alarm. When he started towards her, his wife lept clear of his path, sailing over the nearest building with a Dragon Knight’s trademark grace.

He imitated her path for a few bounds, only to watch her trail vanish into the clouds.

"…Freya!" He trotted to a stop upon the ridge of a strange rooftop and searched the crowded afternoon market, nettled and lost.

She was gone.

He stood outside her dwelling, getting soaked and ruminating over how much he hated it. His gaze fixed on the strange banner plugged atop the roof, piercing the shingles. He only flinched when a dribble of rain sifted through his dreds and into his eyes.

"Huh," Amarant grunted. "So it's finished."

"Whoa," chirped a slick, cocky voice. The monk shifted far enough to glimpse Puck approaching from behind, Uthor steady on his liege's heels. "Hey, aren't you the flamer Amarant?"

The bounty hunter returned a dangerous growl.

"Yep," Puck confirmed, "You're a feisty one. If you're lookin' for Freya, she just took off."

“You don’t say,” Amarant grumbled in the most caustic tone he could muster.

Puck threw an arm vaguely southward. “Yeah, I saw her jump over—”

Amarant pushed around him, sauntering off. “Shut up, king rat.”

Uthor squawked at the snub and His Majesty huffed in the monk’s wake. “Man, what an asshole.”

Fratley rushed home. He wasn’t sure what he was going to find, but hopefully there would be a clue towards his wife’s strange behavior.

He stopped short of the threshold to his house, two distractions catching him at once.

The first, his daughter, bounced up to him from the next street and hugged his legs. “Hi Daddy! School was fun today.”

Fratley blindly petted the hood of Adele’s poncho, his eyes glued to the diversion on his roof. The girl, taking her father’s unresponsiveness for a bad sign, followed his gaze upwards, until she was looking at… a flag? Someone had jammed a short

blade—it almost looked like a dagger—upright into the sloped roof and tied a strip of purple cloth to its grip.

“Daddy, what is that?”

Fratley replied, trepidation icing his voice, “It’s a hallow flag.”

“What’s it for?”

He drew a deep, collected breath and explained. “It’s an old tradition. On the field of battle, Dragon Knights would honor a lost comrade by taking a cloth token from his person and tying it to his weapon, making a flag. It’s proper to use the colors of the warrior’s clan for the cloth, so all who see the flag will recognize the weapon and clan colors of the deceased.”

“What’s ‘deceased’?” Adele innocently wondered, “Izzat dead?”

“Yes, it’s another way of saying dead.”

“Did someone die? Is that why a hallow flag’s there? It’s a purple flag. Which clan is that?”

“It’s…” He scratched his nose, trying to conjure a correct answer over admission that he didn’t know.

He eventually failed, and instead ordered the girl at bay. “Stay here, pumpkin. I’ll go see.”

“Hey hey, Fratman!” Puck paced up to the group, startling the Dragon Knight before he could set foot one inside his own house.

“Your Majesty! Regent!” He spun and bowed briskly to Puck. Adele followed her father’s lead and curtsied.

“Geez,” Puck launched into a rant, “You look like you’ve seen a ghost! First Freya, then that flamer guy, and now you two! What’s with all the moping around here? It’s already raining—sure as hell don’t need more waterworks. You losers made me forget why I came over—”

Puck skipped backwards when he spotted the makeshift monument on the roof. “Whoa! Is that a hallow flag? Who the hell just died?”

“That’s a good question,” Uthor commented, as clueless as the next man.

Brit abruptly stormed out the front door, sobbing loudly and clinging to his father’s free leg. “Daddy!”

Fratley juggled his weapons and children, fighting to stay cool despite the rising bile in his

throat. “What’s wrong, Brit?”

“Mommy left and Uncle Zidane is dead!”

Adele’s hands flew up to her mouth with a squeak. Uthor stiffened and Puck fumed.

“Who the—Zidane? Don’t tell me that bastard kicked the bucket already; he’s not ten years older than I am! What the hell’s going on?”

Uthor tapped his superior’s shoulder. “Your Majesty, really, children are right th—”

Puck whirled on him. “Don’t gimme your prim-and-proper bullshit now! Somebody just died, for craps’sake. I can swear if I want.”

Fratley staggered back, shook his head, scanned his surroundings, urgently sped indoors and vanished upstairs. Adele and Brit were stranded outside, the former shocked and the latter crouched on the sidewalk, blubbering to himself.

Puck began to interrogate the rain. “What the hell’s Zidane doin’ out here, anyway? And what the hell happened to ‘im? Shouldn’t his queen know about this or somethin’?”

Uthor righted his bearings and nodded. “You’re right. We should send notice to Alexandria right

away.”

“Yeah, do that.”

Uthor shuffled away, a low-key, “Oh my,” on his breath.

Fratley reappeared, clutching the doorframe and looking only a little better than someone who had, in fact, seen a ghost. He simply nodded at his king’s questioning look.

Puck, never at a loss for words, blithely lamented, “Damn, Zidane’s dead. Didn’t see that comin’, no sir. Vivi’s friend. Helluva nice guy. Kicked a lot of ass in that war thingy, too.”

The king flicked his tail decisively.

“Oh well, shit happens.”

8. Letters

For the next month Garnet was beside herself with grief, not taking any visitors at all, much less consolation. Beatrix commented that it was as if a piece of her heart had died the moment Zidane did.

In Her Majesty’s eyes, the funeral was a tear-hazed blur, too long and too bitter and yet too brief and too quiet.
She was still garbed in black for the ninth reunion, her dark dress specifically tailored with her swollen belly in mind. Though she was more open about her loss by then, the occasion still felt like more obsequies. Amarant didn’t show, and never did again. The reunions became a vestigial shadow on the calendar. Contact between the remaining six war-heroes was reduced to casual, infrequent visits, business and letters.

Garnet named her son Gabriel, and he resembled a little bit of nobody. Mikoto was a good sport about it, offering to explain that a Genome’s blonde hair, blue eyes and tail were recessive traits. No more questions were asked.

Three years later, Lord Barley moved into the castle, taking the widowed queen’s hand in marriage.

As far as the rest of the world knew, they lived contently ever after.

Freya didn’t know what to do with the strange letter she’d claimed from Amarant. It wasn’t the kind of thing a parent would want to pass on to their young children, and certainly not the kind of thing one would deliver to a widow—more than once she’d considered handing it off to Garnet, but the Dragon Knight always lost her nerve in the queen’s sad, dark eyes.

She would do it someday, Freya kept telling herself, but not today.

Until that fateful day, she would have the letter to herself, something to peruse now and then in private with a wistful chuckle. It warmed her heart to remember the letter’s deliverer as much as its writer.

“Do you want me to pay you off or what?”

They'd met up, seemingly by coincidence, at the mouth of Gizamaluke's Grotto. Freya was stopped in her tracks by Amarant's scathing congeniality.

She spun to face him, one hand's sure hold on her polearm, and squished her face with irritable confusion. "What?"

"Your money, you dumb rat," he clarified, "I heard you lost a stupid bet on me."

Freya smirked. "I don't want your money. I'd sooner fight you for it than just take it."

"Oh really?" Amarant lifted his voice, suddenly more interested than before.

"Sorry, that wasn't a challenge," she cut him short.

"That's a shame."

Freya shook her hands at him, exasperated. "What's your problem, anyway? I can't understand why you always want to fight your friends!"

"That monkey got it. What's *your* problem?"

"My problem? What are you talking about?"

“You and Fratguy. What’s your deal, crying over shit he can’t even remember?”

“How the hell did you…?” *No, don’t even ask, I don’t want to know where his ears have been.* “I think my love-life is the least of your business, Amarant Coral!” she flared.

Amarant plowed ahead, heedless to her indignation. “You’ve already taken the goddamn leap and married the guy. He loves you, you obviously loved him enough to say you wanted to spend the rest of your life with him, that’s good enough. People have gotten married on less—just look at that crackpot captain and his general, or that prissy stiff witch and her regent. You’re never gonna understand what happened in the past or know what’s going to happen to you tomorrow, you just gotta deal with what’s right in front of you and quit being a whiny bitch.”

Not only was the unwanted advice the most she’d ever heard out of the bounty hunter’s mouth at once, but it managed to raise every hackle she had, word by word. Her knuckles tightened around the shaft of her weapon. “You’re asking for a butt-kicking,” Freya growled venomously.

He shrugged. “I’ve never asked for less.”

That unbelievable bastard. She was being baited, and she was falling for it—it was exactly what he wanted and, to her own surprise, she *didn't care*. She would play his twisted game of friendship. "…Fine, let's go."

It was the wisest fight she'd ever started.

I know this is supposed to be heartwarming or poetic or really profound or, something, but I'll be honest and tell you that I just couldn't pull it off with a straight face—pen—whatever. It would be a bold-faced lie, and I can't lie to you guys, my best friends. (Also know that I'm on my fourth shot of whiskey and Cinna and Marcus say I'm really really tongue-loose when I'm shit-faced and I guess they would know better 'cause I can't remember. But damn is this letter depressing, you can't grudge me a few drinks to get things going.)

It's been my personal secret for a while that I am, well, about to kick the bucket. I'm sorry for hiding it from everyone, but I couldn't see the good in telling you all the truth. It'd just be a lot of grief for everyone, and I don't need anyone's pity. I'm sorry if it feels like I betrayed your trust, but know that I

never wanted to get you guys mixed up in my problems. It's just not fair.
Anyway, since the reaper's been hanging around my doorstep, I'd been thinking a lot about what I want to leave behind for the world. I'm flat broke and treasure, though cool, wouldn't really say it, you know?
So instead, I'm going to write down, for everyone's benefit, the facts of life as I came to know them. These are hard-won pearls of wisdom, I swear!

You don't need money to be rich. Material collateral counts as well. But don't ever bet off your friend's shoes unless you're prepared to walk a mile without yours.

Never blow off an ultimatum—you never know when it's for real.

Never blow off your friend's birthday, even for a girl.
Never blow off your boss's birthday, <u>especially</u> for a girl.
On a related note, never let your friend's girl blow you.
And get a boss that's too ugly to get girls.

It might not be professional to sleep with your co-workers, but <u>damn</u> can it be hot.

Never say "rat bastard" in front of a Burmecian.

"Bitches" and 'hos' are two distinct flavors that should be mixed with care, and in fact if you're touring the establishments on the east side of Treno you want to ask for "hos and bitches" to avoid too much of the latter—unless you're into that sort of thing.

Keep your friends close, your enemies closer, and your money in your front pockets, where it's harder to pick—unless you're into that sort of thing.

You can't kill yourself by holding your breath.
Suspense can't really kill you either.
Daggers can, though.

Don't believe those ads in the paper that say you can "enhance" your "love life" by two inches or more. They only bring pain.

If it looks like a girl, smells like a girl, talks like a girl, and treats you like a girl… it still might not be a girl. Carry lube.

Catwomen are extremely territorial, but for some reason don't mind gangbangs.

Grass is not a substitute for real food, but I say the same thing about jerky and nobody believes me.

You'll believe me if you ever try to eat grass, though. Really, please don't.

There is no discreet way to scratch your ass, pick your nose or adjust your package in public. Though there is a way to do all three at once. I wouldn't recommend trying it if you don't have a tail.

It really is impossible to suck your own dick, though. Quit trying.

Don't be so impatient that you can't listen.

Don't be so set in your ways that you can't change, or don't know how to.

Never be too busy to help someone.

Hey, your body is your business. You can stick whatever you like up your ass, but kindly pull the stick out first.

All the world's a stage, full of crappy actors.

There are two kinds of people in the world: the idiots who think they know everything and the idiots who actually do.

I don't care if it's rude, don't accept strange cups of tea from anyone. ANYONE.

Shit happens.

Don't lust too much—you'll lose yourself.
Don't love too much—you'll get hurt.

Those are my sins. I don't regret a damn one of 'em.

I just wish I'd learned sooner how to be honest with myself. I don't think I ever would have if not for you guys, my friends. I wouldn't take back a single day of my life if it meant not meeting any of you. All the money and power in the world isn't worth your friends, your family… or your soul.

Enjoy life. Enjoy your youth. You never know when it'll fade away or be taken from you.

Always have fun in whatever you do, and of course, take care of yourself.

Just a little advice from a has-been bookworm.

P.S: Dagger, you're the love of my life. I knew from the time we met that you were the one I wanted to spend the rest of my life with. All I ever wanted was for you to be happy. That's why I never told you the truth. But I should have been more open with you, I know that, now. Old habits die hard, I suppose.

Barley, take good care of Dagger, and her kid too. He's (assuming it's a boy, of course you never know) yours too, don't forget. You have to be there for her now, to give her the family she needs. Now that I'm gone, she's all yours. Don't ever say I didn't cut you a good deal.
Don't get me wrong, I think you're a nice guy, and I've trusted you enough already to let you into my wife's life. But all the eidolons help me, if you break her heart or mistreat that kid I'm going to come right back out of this grave and kick your ass, no questions asked.

Mikoto, I'd ask you to take care of those kids, but I don't think I have to. Even if you won't admit it, I know you love them. Don't forget that I love you and the kids, too!

Steiner, yelling like that all the time is bad for your blood pressure. A doctor told me so.

Beatrix, invest in earplugs. And take care of yourself, of course. I hope Alexander grows up to be as good and strong a man as his father, and as tough and wise as you.

Quina, sorry I couldn't stomach those frogs' legs, no matter how you cooked them. I'm sure they're really tasty… if you're a Qu.

Eiko, listen to Cid and Hilda, but don't ever let them or anybody get in the way of who you are and where you came from. You should always be honest with yourself, like your grandpa said, right? Tell Morrison hi for me.

Amarant, maybe I'll see you in the next life (there's gotta be a special place for thugs like us, don't you think? All that "cycle of souls" crap sounds too boring.) You can have your rematch there.

Freya, do what makes your heart smile. Life's too short to waste on bullshit. Stick by what—and who—you love.

I wish I could have stayed, just a little longer. I wanted to share my life with the people I've grown up with, and grow old with the ones I love. You can't always get what you want, though. You just gotta be happy with the hand you're dealt and grow a sense of humor, because life will really suck without one.

My friends, my life, my love…

Goodbye.

You've made every memory worth it.

Well, show's over. This has been some good, depressing, hilarious fun. Heaps and tons of thanks to The RPGenius (read his fics, goodies for everyone) for braving his insomnia to proofread my chapters. You're always a good sport. Thanks to DK (read his fics, awesome darque FF8 stuff) for help with the seventh chapter, and to Guardian1 (read her fics, awesome darque FF9 and KH stuff) for her bit of help with the last chapter. Special thanks, as always, to my reviewers (read their fics), and very obscure thanks to my mother (she has no fics), who introduced me to the idea that love might not, in fact, be enough.

I guess this fic is another testament to how much I can't give a shit about Garnet. I've *tried*, but the give-a-shit gland just won't kick into gear (you can imagine the constipation—or better that you don't). This is the closest I'll ever come to splitting up ZidaneGarnet, though; even if my heart can't understand why therluvissopur, my head's got a fair grasp of it. Some canon you just don't screw with.

That said, it's tons of fun to write Zidane and Amarant. I was a little wary of tackling Freya, despite how much I adore her, or perhaps because of that—I was afraid of messing her up (also Freya fans can get pretty rabid, best not to piss them off).

Hopefully I did a passable job on all the characters, because, at least to me, characterization is very important.

It's occurred to me that I've now written Zidane's life from the ending of the game (*Tree of Life*) to his death (*Love is not Enough*), and then from the time he was born to his joining Tantalus (*Initiating a Gaian*). Excluding an in-game fic (I dunno, I just don't dig there), there's only one place left to explore! Seems inevitable that I'm gonna write a Tantalus fic. I guess I'll take it on next year or something.

Until then, if you want some more FF9 action from me, go check out *Fleeing Dragons*. Crossover Mary Sue fun in space, that is (you wish I was joking). Also, if you dig around my website (see profile), you might uncover *Chimera Quest*, FD's follow-up in webcomic form (lawls i can draw gud, plz sign the guestbook kthx). It's about the Iifa Tree!

Okay, enough wanking from me. Go forth and have fun in whatever you do, my readers.

the neiphiti dragon

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